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Next Generation Diaspora: the formation of Iranian American-ness among second-generation migrant internet users in Los Angeles

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Next Generation Diaspora:

The formation of Iranian American-ness
among second-generation migrant
internet users in Los Angeles

Summary

This is an ethnography of Web 2.0 usage by the children of Iranian immigrants in Los Angeles. As Web 2.0 applications advance, diversify, and become part of daily life for many, it becomes important to understand how these developments shape the formation of contemporary identities. This ethnography hones in on how people use specific web applications in the context of their everyday lives. For migrant web users, advancements in communication technologies mean increased channels of staying in touch with their country of origin. This is often studied in terms of the endurance of national homelands through the long-distance attachments that internet communications help to create. However, as new technologies become increasingly commonplace, migrants also come to use internet for a range of purposes that also allow them to express their embedded-ness within their country of settlement. This is especially pertinent in the case of second-generation migrants (or children of migrants) who are raised, if not born, in the country of settlement, many of whom are coming of age in conjunction with these communications technologies.

Although the importance of transnational theoretical perspectives on migrant identities (which emphasize both long-distance and host country attachments) has been established in the social sciences, relatively little is still known about how migrants indeed *combine*, on the one hand, the long-distance attachments they sustain via their web use, and, on the other hand, other types of internet use that exemplify their societal engagement within the countries where they live. Hence, the in-depth perspective I offer on Iranian Americans in Los Angeles engages with and sheds light on how this long-distance communication with Iran takes shape alongside a variety of other kinds of web use.

The research I conducted is specifically interested in web use by second-generation migrants. How do children of migrants from Iran to the US fashion ways of being Iranian American through their internet usage? The thesis addresses this question from an anthropological perspective. This called for ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Los Angeles, California for a period of approximately one year, and consisted of conducting formal and informal interviews with a set of young adults of the second-generation, as well as conducting participant observation at a range of group events. It also consisted of observing some respondents interfacing with certain websites, following certain websites myself, documenting and producing certain web content, and communicating with people online. That is, I used conventional ethnographic methods to study the varied uses of internet through web applications such as social media platforms, websites, mobile web apps, and email. In this way, I joined scholars who are contributing to the burgeoning subfield of digital anthropology, which is defined by its approach to studying internet usage practices as an entwined part of the practices of everyday life.

This thesis draws upon broader theories from media anthropology and media studies that highlight how both the content and the material form of media shape the way people interpret messages and experience communication. As is bolstered by existing theories of media and identity, notions of Iranian American-ness and processes of identification rely on such experiences and interpretations. I investigate my respondents' particular interpretations and experiences with the specific web applications they use in order to understand how their identities are formed with and through media, and how they come to have a sense of belonging as Iranian Americans. My work, therefore, adds to the body of work on internet as it helps build an understanding of how Iranian American-ness comes to be experienced as such through people's everyday media usage.

By focusing on Iranian diaspora in the US this research contributes to the existing body of work that has engaged with questions of self and identity formation in the context of the Iranian diaspora in the West. Los Angeles in particular is well-known as a hub for Iranian exile

migration, and has attracted much scholarly attention, also with regard to exile media production in the city. However, as the causes, demographics, and policies shaping migration from Iran have transformed over the years, research that explores the changing nature of diaspora identifications becomes very important. More specifically, with the relatively recent rise of internet technologies and the coming of age of a new generation of Iranian Americans, the question of how important the concept of exile (and its associations with longing from afar) still is for understanding identity formation among Iranian diaspora comes to the fore even more clearly.

Through conducting fieldwork, I found that specific themes and topics were of particular importance for people regarding how they talked about and put into practice their senses of belonging. These included notions of home, modes of remembering the past, ways of engaging with racial difference, and narratives of connecting with Iran's Green Movement. This last topic was significant as the field research was primarily carried out during 2009, the year of the Iranian Presidential elections and the rise of the Green Movement as a protest movement in the wake of these elections that summer. Each of the ethnographic chapters of this thesis is devoted, respectively, to discussing each one of these themes.

Chapter 1 draws on key notions of diaspora home. Home is conceptualized as being formed through social processes rather than being located in a given place (such as a distant homeland). However, physical places are still very important for formations of home — even in the context of web usage — as people create changing, diasporic attachments to new places both in Iran and the US. Scholars of Iranian diaspora in Los Angeles have shown how place is important for formations of home as people make new places into home as they live their lives there. The chapter builds on this idea, showing how places themselves also responsible for how people come to be at home there. Specifically, this chapter focuses on three kinds of places that I found to be important to my respondents when talking about home: 1. the family house, 2. the city of Los Angeles, and 3. sites of return inside Iran.

I argue that the use of web applications plays a role in processes of home formation in these places, as web usage fosters certain ways of being in, moving between, and developing relationships to places. I demonstrate that formations of home for my respondents depend on a combination of the places in question and ways in which they put specific web applications to use. In being at home, my respondents seek out emotional, experiential, and personalized approaches to representing and engaging with places that have relevance to their second-generation lives. While they do this in ways that at times invoke and build upon the first generation's movements and traces, my respondents' own practices of living in particular places crisscross the places that their parents' generation bestow(ed) with meaning through their (continued) inhabitation. It is in this way that they re-shape diaspora home as a new generation.

Chapter 2 concerns remembering. It focuses on how the past is part of notions of belonging for my second-generation respondents. They choose and shape the narratives of the past that they want to represent based on their claims in the (diasporic) present. However, they also feel the responsibility to conserve the past as something that is not of their own making, but rather something inherited. In this way, their practices align with a notion of cultural heritage. I take this term to mean the production of the past for a collective in the present, while framing that past as inherited from antecedent others. I have focused on three main practices of remembering that emerged as important in my findings: 1. Remembering Iranian and American national pasts in overlap with one another, 2. remembering the ancient Persian (Achamaenid) period, and 3. remembering the modern pre-revolutionary past of Iran's 60s and 70s.

Through their practices of remembering, my respondents made efforts at towards re-politicizing the past, re-educating themselves, and re-defining diaspora. I found that people's interactions with artifacts, their bodily experiences, and their engagements with the materiality of made products all allow them to experience elements of the past through their senses. This, I argued, helped build certain shared sensibilities and styles that appeal to (sometimes specific parts of) the second generation. I also show how physical objects are seen as mediating

elements of the past in ways that the web applications they use cannot. Instead these applications facilitate access to the copies, digitizations, and networks that feed the creative processes of producing, reproducing, and bestowing importance on a past for young people to hold on to.

Chapter 3 covers the topic of race. It discusses my second-generation respondents' diverse claims to racial difference in a context where Middle Easterners and Muslims living in the US are increasingly racialized as a group. In this chapter, I focus on my respondents' practices of self-representation and how their web use fits into their broader media environments that include representations of Iranians and Iranian Americans. This inescapably implicates them in a wider atmosphere where Muslims and Middle Easterners are racialized as minorities in the West. With the help of web applications, they position themselves within this context and engage with categories of racial difference through projects of identity politics that set them apart from their parents' generation and align them with other minorities. I discuss the many ways they use web applications to engage with (subverting, resisting, and appropriating) racialized ways of seeing and being seen.

This chapter argues against assumptions about the disappearing body (and with it race and gender categories) in studies of internet-mediated self-representation. The respondents use web applications as extensions of offline spaces for alternative self-representations, but face the same limitations as those face-to-face spaces when it comes to reaching wider audiences. In this chapter I discuss three ways in which my respondents engage with racial difference and dedicate a section to each of these aspects. First I discuss how whiteness is rejected and racial difference claimed in ways that are seen as contrasting with the first generation's practices. Second I cover some of the divergences within the second generation as to how and under which circumstances such racial difference is claimed with the use of digital media. Third, I consider the gendered aspects of racialization that emerged as a significant part of my respondents' stories and practices. I show how many of my respondents see race as located unchangingly in their bodies, while at the same time, somewhat paradoxically, there are also

those who acknowledge and advocate for the multi-vocality and dynamism of the group, which blurs the boundaries of newly-appropriated racial categories.

Chapter 4 deals with social media's significant role for the diaspora during the 2009 post-election turmoil in Iran. This was very important for many diaspora Iranians' sense of identification with those in Iran. Social media also took on the status of a newsworthy thing in itself. In this chapter, I highlight three main narratives that circulated in the aftermath of the hotly disputed Presidential elections of 2009 and during the protest movement that it spurred. These include 1. Narratives about possibilities of virtually "being there" or mediated presence, 2. narratives about the possibilities for "internet democracy," and 3. narratives about social media's ability to go beyond its own supposed "shallowness." Underlying each of the dominant narratives I discuss is how that web usage brings people a sense of immediacy, whether this is through a sense of presence, control, or emotional connection. I argue that this sense of immediacy relies precisely on how particular messages are mediated. That is, an experience of immediacy is compelling for users in certain situations, and this primarily relies on the aesthetics of the mediated experience.

Some of my respondents were instrumental in shaping how this movement was transnationally mediated in their capacity as web media users and producers. Key actors from the second generation joined with recent migrants and activists in Iran to convey interpretations of the social and political intricacies of the Iranian context for diaspora audiences and take positions themselves. For my respondents, making sense of this movement and negotiating their own positioning in relation to these events relied inexorably on their practices of making sense of their media environment. Based on how people implement and make sense of their own practices involving social media, I argue that they develop new sensitivities, new literacies, particular creative forms of expression, and certain logics of media usage.

This thesis comes to two main conclusions. First, second-generation migrants' transnational modes of positioning themselves towards the country of "settlement" and "origin" are intertwined with one another. They strengthen one another through long-distance belonging to

a homeland in adaptive ways, while also developing claims to rights through identity politics frameworks in the society where they live. It is clear that my respondents display various emerging ways of claiming and appropriating otherness, and that these sometimes set them apart from their parents' generation, and other times align them with longer ancestries that include their families, immediate and distant, and also situate them with respect to the varied environments they find themselves in as Americans. Doing this is crucial for how they attain a sense of belonging as children of migrants. Second, being oneself as an Iranian American relies on mediation. Whether it is through place attachments, remembering, representing race, or relating to an uprising from afar, these ways of being Iranian American require media. Web usage becomes incorporated into second-generation migrants' practices of self-styling, and these practices create specific modes of migrant belonging. These styles are a testament to the particularities of overlapping and multiple ways of being Iranian American.

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Introduction

“Not to toot my own horn or anything,” Sepideh said, “but I was doing what *Nokteez* did in the UK years before them.” Sepideh and I were having our conversation at the desk in the bedroom of her Santa Monica house while sitting in front of her large, sleek computer screen. *Nokteez.com*¹ was a London-based website that described itself as a project that “collects and shares slices of Contemporary Iranian culture, in the fields of art, music, design, theatre and film.” Sepideh was talking about her work on her blog, *Parsarts*, as well as some sites and blogs she followed. To her, *Nokteez* was exemplary of how blogs and sites similar to hers had begun to emerge since she started blogging in 2002/2003. These were sites that focused on Iranian cultural production and were produced by diaspora Iranians. With its byline, “Iranian Diaspora Life/Culture/Identity,” Sepideh had (according to the site’s description) begun *Parsarts* to highlight “Iranian life and culture abroad.” Something of an early-adopter, Sepideh had worked in web content editing, and very soon after I met her in California in 2008, she began working for Google in Santa Monica. It was striking that after my main fieldwork period in Los Angeles came to a close at the end of 2009, a few of my other respondents also started up English-language, web-based projects focusing specifically on Iranian culture, history, and arts, including a range of diaspora cultural production and scholarly writing. It seemed something of a trend was emerging; a growth of sites different than the older and widely-known *Iranian.com* in that they were set up not as open platforms but each curated with a vision, the vision of a younger generation.

¹ The site has since become inactive. The last Twitter updates are from posts in 2010.

Dedicated to Iranian diasporic culture, and each with their own scope, sites like *Ajam Media Collective*, *Btaarof*, *Jigaram.com*, and *Yaddashts* had in common that they were small-scale projects and where almost entirely produced by US-based children of Iranian migrants. Non-existent just a few years prior, these projects sprouted up in conjunction with the increasing proliferation and diversification of web technologies. Their emergence also overlapped with the coming-of-age of a generation of young people who had grown up in the diaspora and had something to say about that experience. During my time in LA and thereafter, I was continuously fascinated by how this new generation of Iranian Americans incorporated their web usage into their ways of being Iranian American and how Iranian American-ness, in turn, came to shape their web usage.

But this was not what I had originally set out to study by doing research on Iranian diaspora web users. Having been intrigued by the Iranian blogging phenomenon that rose significantly in the early 2000s, I was drawn to the unique border-crossing potentials of blogs for helping diaspora bloggers and readers at a distance to participate in and contribute to the formation of the predominantly Iran-based, Farsi language blog scene, or Weblogistan/“Veblogestan” (Alinejad, 2011; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2004; Doostdar, 2004; Hendelman-Baavur, 2007; Shakhsari, 2011).² I was impressed by stories about the political potential of easy-to-use blogging applications and the brave acts of political dissidents in the Islamic Republic, though some had since fled overseas to pursue their web publishing activities while gaining international audiences.³ I went to LA, the place known for being the highest concentration of Iranians outside Iran, for the first time in 2008 to contact the authors and readers of these kinds of blogs and sites and to find out more about their ways of living in the diaspora while being users of blogs and other websites. But spending time in LA and meeting a variety of web users, I realized that web uses were far more diverse than the political dissidents that had originally drawn my interest. This realization and meeting people like Sepideh, quickly led me to shift interest and focus.

² Also referred to by some as “Blogistan” (Hendelman-Baavur, 2007; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010).

³ I further discuss the literature on these Farsi language blogs in Chapter 4.

Sepideh was no stranger to the phenomenon of the diaspora blogger dissident. And as a young but experienced web editor she was interested in the role of internet for Iranians living in the diaspora. But she echoed the sentiments of many other children of Iranian parents in LA I spoke with when she said of those blogs: “The time it takes for me to read those is simply too long [due to language]. And the context they are writing from within doesn’t speak to me. Their experience is not mine.” Increasingly, children of Iranian immigrants who had grown up in the US, and whose parents had left Iran in large numbers around the 1970s and 80s, were taking to the web to fashion their own stories and experiences of life in the Iranian diaspora. While Sepideh had never been in Iran and sometimes endured the accompanying skepticism about her Iranian-ness from other Iranians, her blog had become a source of connection to other children of Iranian parents in LA, people she had befriended over time and with whom she shared many of her understandings of Iranian-ness. Her blog gave rise to, and thus became rooted within, new social relationships, helping to articulate imagined connections to Iran while also acknowledging her life as an American.

Sepideh’s generation of web-using Iranians in LA raised questions about how a new generation of Iranians was using the web while entering adulthood in the country where they had grown up. The web activities of Sepideh and others like her made me wonder how these young people’s web use and their Iranian American-ness were mutually shaping one another under the given technological and social circumstances. In addressing this issue, my ethnography of Iranian American internet users in LA follows existing research on Iranian diaspora populations that has investigated questions of belonging and identity of LA-based Iranian migrants (Ghorashi, 2002; Naficy, 1993; Sullivan, 2001). However, it does so in a very different context; one in which proliferating web usage is becoming increasingly a part of everyday life in the American-based diaspora. Moreover, it focuses on a migrant generation that has received relatively little scholarly attention, despite being the first generation to have grown up outside Iran from their earliest years. In this introductory chapter, I further elaborate upon and contextualize my focus on second-generation Iranian American web users. I frame this focus by discussing relevant currents

from theories of diaspora and digital media research. I also introduce the methods through which I conducted my field research.

Exile migration versus the rise of a new generation

Since Naficy's *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (1993), an important thread in the literature on Iranian diaspora is the question of how far exile is and remains a useful concept with which to understand Iranian migration. This question is even more relevant given the increasingly diverse motivations and experiences that underlie recent emigration from Iran. My respondents are part of a generation whose entry into young adulthood largely overlaps with the rise of digital media in their day-to-day environments and who live amidst exposure to swiftly-developing communications technologies. They are also coming of age within the changing topography of Iranian diaspora, and in particular a changing population of Iranian Americans in the city of Los Angeles, a city where it is scarcely possible to live without being somewhat cognizant of the significantly sized Iranian American population. Doing research on the second generation in LA means taking into account not only the lingering traces of exile, but also these ongoing shifts in demographics, migration flows, and developments in media technologies.

Anthropological work focusing specifically on the second generation of Iranian migrants is extremely sparse, although the work of Sreberny (2000), McAuliffe (2007), and Maghbouleh (2012) presents rich ethnographic accounts from the disciplines of media studies, human geography, and sociology respectively.⁴ Maghbouleh's work on second generation Iranian Americans makes an argument for Iranian-ness as "an affirmative identity" (2012: 158) that empowers young people to make collective bonds as well as take critical stances towards the "host" society. Bozorgmehr and Douglas' contribution points to an upward socioeconomic trajectory for second-generation Iranian Americans (2011) in

⁴ Other (non-ethnographic) research covering the second generation is focused mainly on the US and comes from sociology, developmental studies, and literary studies (see Bozorgmehr & Douglas, 2011; Chaichian, 1997; Dahi, 2011; Mahdi, 1998; see also Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2013).

contrast to the thesis of “second-generation decline” (Gans, 1992). These developments signify changes in, and increased documentation of, the internal diversity and evolution of Iranian Americans over the past decades. Bozorgmehr’s “internal ethnicity” notion has drawn attention to diversity among Iranian Americans (Bozorgmehr, 1997).⁵ Given this dynamism, Bozorgmehr and Sabagh also raise the question of whether narratives of exile actually characterize most experiences of migration among Los Angeles Iranians (Sabagh & Bozorgmehr, 1987). Bozorgmehr’s more recent documentation of post-9/11 consequences for Iranians in Los Angeles, and for Middle Easterners in the US in general (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009) has also contributed to understanding and conceptualizing the changes over time that this immigrant population has collectively undergone.

Treating the Iranian migrant population in the US as not only full of internal diversity but also showing changing patterns over time calls for a brief historical interlude to lay out the basic trajectory of Iranian migration trends over recent decades. Tens of thousands of Iranians have been in Los Angeles since the first wave of migration to the US in the 1960s through early 70s (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009). This was a period during which US-Iran relations were relatively amicable, and Los Angeles and Tehran became sister cities. However, the reasons for migration changed from the often temporary student migration to more extended or permanent exile and political refuge due to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The latter led to a much more intense, second wave of emigration from Iran.⁶ The third wave is thought to have been set in motion since 1984 (Jalali, 2005) and can be attributed in part to the consequences of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. In-depth accounts of migrational trends to the US have been covered in other research (Bozorgmehr, 1997; Ghorashi, 2002; Mobasher, 2006; Modarres, 1998) and will

⁵ The study of Iranian Americans is an area to which he and collaborators contributed a considerable amount of scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr, 1986; Bozorgmehr and Sabagh, 1988; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996; Bozorgmehr, 1997; Bozorgmehr and Sabagh, 1998; Bakalian and Bozorgmehr, 2009). This includes a particular focus on LA in some early work. The bulk of this is based on predominantly quantitative data and analysis.

⁶ An additional intermediate wave has also been defined between 1970 and 1978, comprised of an affluent, urban populace who had become wealthy during these years of economic growth. Like the first wave, their motivations for movement were also largely economic and professional, and they were dispersed throughout the country (Jalali, 2005).

not be recapitulated in full here. The emigration since the 2009 uprising and the crackdown on student protesters and other activists signals another, much more recent wave that has been less researched as yet.

The Iranian media environment in LA has been suggested by Sreberny to be the richest in the Iranian diaspora (Sreberny, 2001). I take this as a reference to Persian language media that encompasses the many print publications, radio stations, satellite television productions, and basic cable broadcasts coming out of the city. This is part of what makes LA a fertile field site for researching diaspora media. Yet with the rise in popularity of certain websites, web media produced outside the illustrious city emerged as familiar among many of my respondents. These include such sites as the Persian language internet radio broadcast Radio Javan in DC, Iranican.com in Toronto, Iranian.com in San Francisco, and Biya2.com in DC⁷, as well as English language sites aimed at Iranian Americans audiences based elsewhere in North America. These media productions have not yet enjoyed the scholarly attention that LA's satellite television industry has. However, together they signal a possible move towards possible new centers and modes of Iranian diaspora media production that coincides with the generational changes in the diaspora. While such shifts need not be attributed to the rise of internet alone, there is a clear need for research that sheds light on a changing Iranian diasporic media landscape that includes web media.

Thus far ethnographic research has been focused on the first generation of migrants from Iran, a great deal of whom experienced firsthand the major transformations that came with revolution and war, and whose migration experiences were wrought by this. This body of work has tended to highlight in varying balances the trauma of these dramatic transformations that caused the dispersion on the one hand, and the possibilities/advantages of migration on the other. Naficy's theorization of exile and media sees the state of liminality as a stage that not only connects to the lost Iranian homeland

⁷ Radiojavan.com; Iranican.com; Iranian.com; Biya2.com

but does so while adapting to American commercial and societal values. Zohreh Sullivan's work on Iranian exiled intellectuals in LA shows the productivity of diaspora within a literary studies tradition. That is, she sees exile as having more diverse metaphorical meanings for migrant imaginaries than only loss and longing (Sullivan, 2001). Ghorashi also foregrounds the productive possibilities of the liminal condition of hybridity. But she also argues for making a conceptual distinction between exile and diaspora in which the former helps harbor sentiments of a lost national homeland, while the latter helps embrace new beginnings (Ghorashi, 2005; Ghorashi, 2002). Sreberny-Mohammadi makes a similar distinction, drawing on Brah's discussion of diasporic space, which leads her to understand Iranian diaspora as a "looking around" in an "all-around" and "multi-directional" gaze in contrast with the inward looking of a focus on ethnicity and a backward looking of exile (Sreberny, 2000: 182).

In recent work on Iranian diaspora and the second generation, the notion of exile maintains relevance. Maghbouleh situates the Persian language music industry –essentially an industry transported from Iran to Los Angeles after the Islamic revolution – within exilic modes of cultural production. She argues that these modes also generate second-generation claims to homeland and appropriation of collective narratives of loss and pain remembered, or rather, experienced vicariously by the younger generation through shared interest in Persian music (Maghbouleh, 2010a). In addition, Malek's essay on contemporary (literary) cultural production in the Iranian diaspora invokes the productive elements of Naficy's conceptualization of exile to argue that this allows Iranian diaspora cultural producers to occupy new a "in-between" positioning as part of creating a "third space" in the vein of Homi Bhabha's notion (Malek, 2006: 356). Indeed, the work of postcolonial thinkers like Bhabha have been highly influential in the social sciences and humanities for expounding on the ways diaspora positionings represent more than marginalized, silenced, or otherwise discounted states of pain and dislodgement. Such analyses seize on diaspora as a productive condition, one that is envisioned as both future-oriented in the sense of the migrants' own life, but also as template of an increasingly prevalent condition in a future of movement and plasticity.

This tendency in work on Iranian diaspora draws on post-colonial scholarship, which also pays attention to the possibilities of diaspora, as well as the conditions of often-extreme oppression, violence, and exclusion that brought many of these diasporic conditions to bear in the first place. Over time, the literature on Iranian diaspora has increasingly moved from the longing and loss of exile of the first generation, towards seeing diasporic Iranian—nes as an adaptive formation that has generative capacities. Along the way, the notion of exile seems to retain relevance; not only as an analytical reference point for understanding the character of second-generation Iranian migration experiences, but also socially as a trace that lingers heavily in one form or another in my respondents' lives.

The specificities of exile migration also have implications for thinking about transnational migrant identities of the second generation. The lasting fissure of Iranian exile has meant that an Iranian “transnational generation” (Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001: 175) has been marked by uneven obstacles to the flow of transmigracy. The notion of transnational generations has been posited based on the case of the Haitian second generation residing in the US, which are seen to belong to the same generation as their chronological counterparts in Haiti. Although some of my respondents did indeed travel back and forth between the US and Iran with family from a young age, movement is often restrictive in the case of Iran and the US, in part because of the relatively tense diplomatic atmosphere between the two countries' governments. Therefore, the children of Iranian migrants may share more in common in this regard with those of Cuban immigrants⁸ than their Haitian equivalents.⁹ Opportunities for return travel among the second generation hinge on birth certificates, passports, parents' political background, time of migration, possibly severed ties, parents'

⁸ The element of exile that has long defined Iranian migration invokes a particular trajectory that has led to interesting comparisons with Palestinian immigrant experiences in the US (McCloud, 2006: 103) and experiences of pre/post-revolutionary Cuban immigrants/exiles (Bozorgmehr, 1986: 3).

⁹ Though the notion of a “transnational generation” may offer an analytical encompassment of the lives of young Iranians in Iran and how it is shaped by diaspora influences, that investigation lies outside the scope of this research.

trauma, etc. Such travel is therefore neither a given or fluid part of migrant life for many of even the children of Iranian migrants, in LA or elsewhere.¹⁰

In contrast to the specific consequences of exile, much of the literature conceptualizing transnationalism seems to overstate the role of cross-border practices and nation-state incorporation. I discuss how I draw from these transnational migration studies later on in this chapter when I introduce the notion of migrant social fields. I also draw on perspectives that highlight digital media, exile, and the second generation as they foreground limitations to diaspora flows and mobility while studying transnational meaning-making. For instance, Mason's work on Palestinian migrants argues that the second-generation also engage with experiences of exile, and shows that the role of transnational media such as books, songs, and poetry, as well as blogs and email are particularly formative for the second generation's "'virtual' relationship with the homeland" (Mason, 2007: 279). This work shows how issues of exile persist in specific ways for the second generation, but also make it relevant to understand what role internet plays under circumstances where transnational mobility is not a given (Aouragh, 2011). In the case of the Iranian diaspora such impediments emerge due to visa restrictions in the US and fears of detainment or travel restrictions in Iran among other concerns.

Indeed, elements of the notion of exile defined in terms of a connection to a territorial homeland and a sense of nostalgic loss are not all obsolete for my second-generation respondents, even as they take up new web uses; some still express longing for Iran and experience impediments to traveling there. Yet changes in the diasporic and media landscape, especially over the past 10 or so, years mean that the status of exile cultural production in LA has been complicated by the rise of a new generation, as well as emerging media productions and a changing global political environment. While acknowledging how exile can be the nexus of creative and critical forms of identification for young people as well, I focus specifically on certain media uses of this new generation within this changing

¹⁰ Although this atmosphere is not without its changes and shifts with the changing of Presidents and (informal) policies.

environment of cultural production. I now move on to discuss the role of digital media in the context of migration research in an effort to frame my focus on generation, migration, and the web.

Digital media research and second-generation migrants

A proliferation of studies on migrants and Information and Communication Technologies or ICTs (internet technologies in particular) has been generated from a range of academic disciplines over the past half-decade, and the term of “digital diaspora” has created substantial buzz around this work. Arguing for the concept of the “connected migrant,” Diminescu’s (2008) influential work on migrants and ICTs shares basic similarities in its argument with earlier work on migration, which argued that flows of migration have shifted scholarly understandings of the world as naturally sedentary with immobility as the norm, to movement and migration being the norm, with the migrant as the ideal-type in a mobile world (see also Malkki, 1995). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1994) reflects on the seminal work of James Clifford (Clifford, 1992) on diaspora to propose “spaces of dispersal” that are characterized not by displacement and disarticulation from an earlier placement, but by movement that brings about the conditions for new articulations while socially reconfiguring time and space. These new conditions call for new ways of understanding migrant lives, and specifically how ICT usage shapes today’s migrants’ experiences of their migrancy (Diminescu, 2008).

The work on second-generation migrants and digital media also contributes to a growing field of study across academic disciplines (Faulstich Orellana, Thorne, & Lam, 2001; Gillespie, 2000; Lam, 2006; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011; McAuliffe, 2007a; Panagakos, 2003; Annabelle Sreberny, 2000; Wilding, 2006). A number of trends emerge from this body of work. First, this work focuses on young people. This has led to some concerns regarding the way young people are studied in conjunction with digital media, namely, assumptions are made about young people (and children) as either being susceptible to supposed

virtues and/or vices of internet on account of their age alone (see Buckingham on utopian and dystopian ideas about children and computers, 2006: 75). Such suppositions have been criticized as being detached from actual usage practices, in addition to which the language of the native/non-native dichotomy has been pointed out as problematically applied to digital media use (Ginsburg, 2008). A focus on uptake of digital media by young people therefore helps reveal the extent to which age indeed plays into particularities in usage practices. Yet I take care not to treat a respondents' youth as an assumption of their innate digital fluency or as necessarily indicating respondents' desire for change. Rather, I delve into their modes of using internet within social fields of older and younger actors.

A second trend is that the children of migrants are (almost exclusively) studied in terms of their status within families. And attention for second-generation migrants' positions within domestic environments tends to prevail. In contrast, my respondents are slightly older on average, which means that they also position themselves with regard to either younger members of the second generation or a hatchling third generation and not only to their parents or others within their family. This account is hence also characterized by the relative autonomy and cognizance of (young) adulthood. It is an account focused on the second generation's own perspective rather than being driven by the terms of public policy debates about successive generations' "integration"/"assimilation" or foregrounding older generations' concerns about how young people are growing up in the diaspora. By not privileging the place of these young people within their families, I describe my respondents' roles more broadly; as professionals, in their relationships with peers, and in terms of their awareness of and stakes in overlapping scales of social and political developments.

Third, there is an emphasis on cross-generational change. But as Gillespie points out, the combination of second generation youth and digital media should not be taken to automatically signal inter-generational change with respect to the cultural values of parents (Gillespie, 2000). Gillespie's work on second-generation immigrants has

highlighted how studying culture over generations should not treat generational progression as the source of cultural change per se. She argues that:

[S]uch polarised conceptions of culture and of generational differences impede an understanding of their interrelationships and overlap – like cultures, generations are not impermeable or fixed” (2000: 68).

She emphasizes both “malintegration and solidarity between generations” (2000: 68), drawing on Mannheim’s influential 1952 essay on generations that argues for viewing each generation as the repository of prevailing ideas (see Mannheim, 1952). It is useful to understand how internet usage signals certain generational breaks as young people gain increased independence at particular points in their lives. However I do not underestimate the pursuit for cultural continuity.

Fourth, scholars argue for acknowledging the diversity within the second generation itself. Highlighting inter-generational differences only suggests uniformity within generations. Addressing this, McAuliffe’s work destabilizes nationally bounded notions of identity among the second generation by highlighting differences between religious identities (McAuliffe, 2007a, 2007b), while Sreberny pays attention to the interaction between generation and gender (Sreberny, 2000). With this in mind, I also elaborate on the particular ways race, class, religion, and gender cross-cut my respondents’ ways of being Iranian American – intersections that tend to be aligned to reflect the particularities of their second-generation positioning and reflect the diversity within this generation.

Fifth and finally, categories of “ethnic media” that have dominated research on first-generation migrant media practices appear less relevant when it comes to the second generation. Panagakos’ research on Greek satellite television in Canada sees ethnic media as an “everyday fixture for Greek immigrants” (Panagakos & Horst, 2006: 116). She also shows how second and third generations have relatively little use for Greek satellite television and favor internet for its accessible, English-language content, and the international links to other parts of the Greek diaspora (Panagakos, 2003). Such research

on the second generation that compares older and newer media forms in particular cases¹¹ offers useful ways of looking at inter-generational changes as they develop in line with the particularities of a given migration context.¹² My approach incorporates transnational circuits of media messages that are interspersed with other English-language web content and thus engaged with differently than typical “ethnic media” forms like dedicated long-distance or diaspora-produced (Farsi-language) satellite programming (Dayan, 2002). Having discussed how my research is situated within some of the themes running through literature on Iranian diaspora and media and migration research, I now move on to introduce my research questions regarding web media and second-generation Iranian Americans.

Being Iranian American amidst the internet’s rise

As a child growing up in Australia my mother would laugh while tenderly satirizing my (now late) paternal grandmother who lived in Tehran. My parents talked about her memorably comical way of using the telephone in the family house, the house they shared with her and the rest of my father’s family for the first years of their marriage before I was born. When people would call from overseas, her voice would rise from the moderate “*alo?*” (hello?) with which she answered the phone, to a vociferous shout at the moment of realizing who the caller was and the distant location from which the call was reaching her. The volume of conversation would rise a little even when friends and family would call from Shiraz several hundred kilometers away, my mother described. But never as much as for an international call; a call from *khaarej* (overseas – literally “outside”). A little over a

¹¹ See also how Alexanian’s study places her analysis of chosen Iranian websites against the backdrop of satellite television channels, revealing important shifts and changes in media production specific to the emergence of certain popular sites, and arguing that such websites create a “transnational Iranian public sphere” in addition to developing Iranian literary production by promoting heterogeneity of “diaspora” voices (Alexanian, 2008).

¹² Indeed, as Gillespie points out (2000), much of the recent research that has focused on childhood also suggests that children are often the first to adopt new communication technologies.

year after my birth, my parents relocated our small family to Sydney where we were the ones on the other end of those international calls now. And my dear grandmother's shouting voice came to us across the ocean and over the wires we relied on and devices we spoke into.

It was not only with my grandmother with whom I was raised to speak over the phones that sat in each of the living rooms we inhabited over time in Sydney, but a range of other relatives that I grew up knowing (if at all) only from those phone conversations and the few photo albums my parents brought with them when they fled Iran during the war. The precious albums and the letters that came for my parents in Farsi – the script that was consistently and familiarly indecipherable to me for my entire childhood and yet which I remember so clearly as the writing of letters from afar and my mother's diary, which she had brought with her to Sydney. The albums, those letters, and of course that all-important telephone. That was what we had of those people and that place. And so my parents would encourage me to speak to these relatives over the phone as a child. Sometimes gingerly and sweetly enticing me with stories of how deeply those strangers loved me as a small baby, sometimes coercing me with social obligation and cultural custom. And so I spoke and listened; sometimes with love, sometimes robotically. And later I wondered if I would one day laugh with my own (unborn) children at my parents' practices around the phone, the same way they had laughed about my grandmother. Later still, I also wondered what it would mean for transnational families like mine that new communications technologies were mushrooming in use across the globe, technologies that most of my family members would never have envisioned becoming a part of our regular ways of being in touch with one another.

During the process of fieldwork, I attended a theatre production put on by one of the Iranian student groups I had contact with. The play included a humorous skit in which the character of the Iranian grandmother in LA who was the lovable butt of the joke about how she used the internet telephony program, Skype, to make international calls to Iran, including that familiar idiosyncrasy: shouting. The main issue this book deals with concern

how the children of Iranians settled outside Iran, and living lives connecting them to Iran and other diaspora places across borders, deal with issues of cultural change over generations alongside the transformations that come with technological development. How are their Iranian-ness and American-ness formed at once through these important changes?

The central question I address in this book is how my respondents fashion ways of being Iranian American through their lives as second-generation migrants web users. I investigate how my respondents put Iranian American-ness into practice through processes of becoming (them)selves, and I focus on how their web usage figures into this. That is, I try to understand the process of becoming Iranian American by accessing the practices (including web usage practices)¹³ of a group of second-generation residents of LA. I treat “Iranian American” in the first place as an identity label my respondents themselves apply and have a stake in, rather than a category that this research project seeks to define conceptually. I examine how the meaning of this label is applied to selves and how it is defined and re-defined and negotiated situationally while being compounded and cross-cut by other facets of my respondents’ selves.

I also specifically investigate what role internet has in this process of self-formation. I do this by focusing on my respondents’ internet usage. What I mean by internet should be specified here. The difference between the “internet” (or “the net”) and the World Wide Web (or the “web”) is that “internet” is the network through which computers communicate with one another. It is the basic infrastructure, so to speak, and the earliest network that connected multiple computers to one another. It was developed in the 1960s first as a military project (ARPAnet) and later experimented with in academia and eventually used to connect computers for personal and commercial purposes. It has since been developed to connect with expanding communications infrastructures. The web, on the other hand, was developed much later and made public in the 1990s. It is a collection of

¹³ Later in this chapter I come back to defining practices and what I mean by the term “web.”

pages (in the HTML protocol), which can be accessed through a browser software and that are connected to one another through hyperlinks and accessible through URLs (Uniform Resource Locator) or “web addresses.” These pages can also be summarily searched (through the use of a search engine). The web is basically built on top of the internet infrastructure and is the most popular way in which the information on the internet is accessed by people. Other ways of accessing the internet include email, instant chat services, and file transfer services.

The recent advances in web software have also meant changes in social scientific research about internet. The proliferation of the web as a fast-growing format through which people access the internet has signaled a shift toward websites that place the user central in the interface and in the business model (sites like Facebook and Myspace), and this has made the “social” aspects and implications of web application usage increasingly significant. This social or interactive feature that allows users to interact with one another has been popularly promoted as one of the main differences (if not the defining difference) between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, even though formal definitions of the difference between the “old” and the “new” web are not hard and fast (see Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). I am interested in the means through which people access the internet (i.e. the “network of networks” that relies on hardware, servers, cables, wires, and signals to connect computers and other devices to one another). Hence, the specificities of the various formats through which people access the net becomes increasingly interesting to investigate within their specific contexts of use. For this reason I try to specify to which mode of accessing internet I am referring when I discuss my respondents’ use of internet, rather than referring to their general use of “the internet.” I also use the term “application” to refer most frequently to web applications or online software like websites and social media platforms, but I also use the term to refer to non-web services such as email. By this I mean to refer to the various forms in which people encounter the internet, as they contribute to and interact (primarily) through the web through usage.

My focus is on how these practices of (predominantly web-based) usage interact with processes of self-formation for my second-generation Iranian American respondents. I set out to show how Iranian American-ness comes into being through a variety of practices that pertain to its various aspects and that people who identify as such engage in. In this book, I discuss such aspects of Iranian American-ness in the form of a few themes. Delving into each of these themes contributes to addressing the central question of how Iranian American selves are formed through web usage. These themes include: home, the past, race, and the rise of the green movement in Iran. I choose to give these four themes a central place in the book because they emerged strikingly during my fieldwork period and appeared to have important implications and resonance for my respondents and the field. I therefore organize the four main ethnographic chapters of this book around these four themes. I describe these further at the end of this chapter where I present the structure of the book. In the following I discuss more in depth the concept of mediation I use in this book, which links media with notions of cultural identification/belonging.

Internet and the formation of selves

Cultural mediation

The study of culture/society and media deals from various perspectives with the issue of where power is in the relationship between media and people. Simply put, it asks whether media have power over the lives of passive people, or whether people are the ones with power over media. The move from the Frankfurt School's interpretation of mass media's complicity in capitalism's structures of (re)production has largely given way to theories that call attention to how people actively interpret messages in diverse ways, sometimes contrary to the intention behind production. From a communication science perspective, Lievrouw describes the shift towards theorizing the active role people play in assigning and negotiating the meanings of media content within social and cultural contexts (Lievrouw, 2009). She argues for situating the notion of "mediation" centrally in theories of media and

communication as a way to merge the social and cultural with the technological in a process of mutually constitution. This draws on what science and technology studies has referred to as a “mutual-shaping” perspective (Boczkowski, 1999). The important thing about this perspective is that it acknowledges the shaping power of people’s everyday practices while also highlighting the “constraints and affordances of material infrastructure” (Lievrouw, 2009: 310).

The role of materiality in processes of mediation has been stressed by scholars of new/digital media and culture with various different emphases. Stuart Hall’s analysis of coding and decoding culture as text is one extension of this turn towards the active interpretation work involved in the communication of media and cultural messages (2006). While this is a semiotic theory of culture as text, media scholars have emphasized how not only media texts but also the meanings of material media devices are also interpreted by people. This interpretation happens when they are taken up in practices of use. Sonia Livingstone has made this distinction in the terminology of “media-as-object” from “media-as-text,” but states that “people are always both *interpreters* of the media-as-text and *users* of media-as-object, and the activities associated with these symbolic and material uses of media are mutually defining” (Livingstone, 2006: 346). Another approach is Roger Silverstone’s¹⁴ notion of “domestication” (Haddon, 2004; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996).¹⁵ This approach also treats media objects and texts as integrated. “Domestication emphasizes the meanings that people attribute to technologies, as well as how they use

¹⁴ Silverstone’s notion of mediation has also been influential in media and communication studies. As he writes, “mediation... requires us to understand how processes of communication change in the social and cultural environments that support them as well as the relationships that participants... have to that environment and each other” (Silverstone, 2005), which suggests a two-way flow of influence. His notion further seems to mesh with the other notions of mediation mentioned here in the sense that it sees media not only as socially embedded but also a mutual shaping between the social and the technological. He states: “Mediation... extends into a concern with how culture is negotiated in the tactics of everyday life” (Silverstone, 2005).

¹⁵ “Silverstone, Hirsh, and Morley (1992), and later Silverstone and Haddon (1996), isolated four intersecting processes that constituted television’s domestication: appropriation, incorporation, objectification, and conversion. Objectification refers to the physical placement or inscription of the technical object, a commodity bought in the market and hence initially alien to the domestic fabric. The physical placement of material artifacts into a particular domestic environment, Silverstone and colleagues (1992) argue, objectifies the moral, aesthetic, and cognitive universe of those feeling comfortable with them” (Bakardjieva, 2011).

them – that is, both the material and the symbolic aspects of technology” (Lievrout, 2009: 313). Both the objects and (textual) content of media are appropriated by their actively-interpreting audiences/users. I see mediation therefore as encompassing the role of technological forms of programs and devices as well as the content of the message.

The concept of mediation has also been used in cultural anthropology to analyze the relationship between socio-cultural processes and media. William Mazzarella makes a call for anthropology to study media and society precisely in this way, which sees media as constitutive of and therefore integral to the processes of social life (2004). Birgit Meyer (Meyer, 2013) has similarly conceptualized media and culture as co-composed within a single historical trajectory. From this media anthropological perspective, culture and cultural identity are always necessarily mediated, even when face-to-face interactions are involved.¹⁶ As Lievrout also argues, mediation allows for media to be seen not as interference between people and reality, but indeed mediation is what makes that reality for people (Lievrout, 2009). As Mazzarella suggests, modernity serves to draw our attention to the ways meaning and value have always necessarily been made through ongoing processes of mediation, rather than this being a characteristic that accompanies recent media forms.¹⁷ It implies that the processes of cultural mediation in the current moment are different from those of the pre-Enlightenment past only in scale and degree rather than in kind, and that there is no pre-mediated condition to which to contrast the current processes.

In the context of modern “disenchantment” (Taylor, 2009) mediation takes on extra importance as it becomes the way for the self to be successfully communicated and situated within collectives, or “aesthetic formations” (Meyer, 2009). These formations are suggested

¹⁶ The term “configuration” is used by Bakardjieva (2005) to reflect the ways people are configured by their use of media while they configure it through their usage.

¹⁷ Indeed, the emphasis that influential scholars like Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2013) have placed on the modern world’s shift from stability to fragmentation of people, places, cultures and identities has in turn been criticized by others to be an overstatement of the impact of (late) modernity (Ahmed, Castaneda, Fortier, & Sheller, 2003; Featherstone & Burrows, 1995; Massey, 1994).

to create a sense of belonging, as they use their own particular modes of address to create audiences. My object of study here is processes of mediation, since compelling mediation is what forms Iranian American selves. In other words, if culture necessarily requires mediation, then the ways in which culture is mediated compellingly for people is revealing of how Iranian American selves are formed. Meyer also argues that media have specific “aesthetic properties and propensities” such that they “do not simply transport messages neutrally but shape them” by virtue of these propensities (Meyer, 2013). This transportation of messages through particular formats and forms reiterates the role of material affordances and constraints mentioned above. Meyer argues that these propensities of media constitute audiences by appealing to certain senses and raising certain sensibilities.

Like culture, selves are not less real because they are mediated. Rather, it is the process of mediation that gives people a sense of inclusion into the audience, a sense of belonging to an aesthetic formation, a feeling of deep connection. There is an important link here with what Don Slater has argued in his work on internet. He shows that although there are assumptions that internet usage leads to new kinds of identities that are seen as merely “realistic” rather than real, people are nonetheless deeply invested in making sure the identities they encounter online are authentic. He states, “authenticity is a fundamental criterion by which participants understand and manage their on-line experiences” (Slater, 1998: 91). As Slater goes on to argue, the participants in these exchanges use strategies of authentication that fix the other in a body-like presence locatable in time and space. He also argues elsewhere that people engage in a “materialization” of digital objects, suggesting that digital objects have ambiguous materiality and that people therefore give them material qualities in order to be able to place them in orders of ethics, trustworthiness, and morality (Slater, 2002). It appears that rather than solids melting into air, users of internet appear to use various strategies to solidify selves and one another, making mediated selves real through authentication.

The inclusion of internet into perspectives that treat culture as mediated is particularly important, precisely because of the persistent assumptions (that Slater and others have pointed out) that there is something particular about internet that makes it and the social configurations it mediates “virtual,” a notion is (still) often understood in opposition to “real.”¹⁸ This is despite arguments that internet-mediated selves are not necessarily less “authentic” than selves un-mediated by internet, or can even be “more authentic than actual-world embodiment” (Boellstorff, 2008: 134). In this study I focus on the case of second-generation Iranian American internet users, and seek to find out how they use internet as part of their ways of forming their true selves. Focusing on people’s uses of internet requires ways of studying their media practices in the context of their lives. In the following I elaborate on what this means. The importance of locating power in this analysis of media and selves (as mentioned above) is important precisely because of the significance of questions about who has the power to decide who is who/what.

Affordances and use

Elemental to debates around the relationship between society and media is the issue of technological determinism. Extending from debates over whether power lies with people who do things with media or media who do things to people, discussions of technological determinism concerns whether technology causes the social changes that accompany technological change, or whether human agents intend/bring about that change (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2003). Technologically deterministic analyses of the transformative power of internet over society were particularly typical of early accounts when concepts and analyses were informed more by science fiction notions such as “cyberspace” than wide-scale, everyday usage (see Hine, 2008: 258). Scholars have since

¹⁸ Even though relatively early internet studies were also produced that challenged this conceptual opposition and methodological separation between virtual and real in research on and about internet communications technologies (Hine, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999), it is noteworthy that students and scholars of internet studies from various academic disciplines still apply this dichotomy to varying degrees of explicitness.

become increasingly wary of the accusation, and nuances have emerged in the debate that differentiate “hard determinism” from “soft determinism” (see Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006; Lister et al., 2003). The latter is thought to differ from the former in that it does not suggest that technology is the *cause* behind societal change with the development of new tools, but rather that the *effect* of technological and societal changes, because these do indeed become determined by technologies at a certain stage in their development (Lister et al., 2003). Seen in this way, media technologies are not only shaped by social circumstances, but also shape social/cultural change themselves.

The notion of “affordances” explains how media shapes meanings for people. Namely, it posits that this shaping is not complete and deterministic but more of a constraint on a set of possibilities for use. As the social and technological develop through an ongoing, mutual interaction, thinking about affordances helps to encompass this mutuality without claiming that either the social or the technological determines how things develop. As first articulated by Gibson (1979), “the theory of affordances” drew on and critiqued elements of gestalt psychology to assert that an affordance of a thing or artifact is both its physical properties and the value it is attributed. That is:

An affordance is neither an objective nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us understand its inadequacy (Gibson, 1979: 129)

An affordance is basically what an artifact makes possible for a user to do with it. Later definitions of affordances developed in the context of the sociological study of technology highlighted how the concept helped recognize the “constraining, as well as enabling, materiality of artefacts” (Hutchby, 2001: 441). This rejects the technological determinism of a view that suggests that technology is the cause of new forms of sociality, while also arguing that technological artefacts are not simply neutral objects but ones that are made, designed, programmed by people. Hence, not just any interpretation or meaning can be given to a technological artefact regardless of its material properties (many of which are created with intent).

What is important is that these properties of a technological artefact become apparent and perceived through the act of use, which is based on information about the environment or artefact. Web applications, in other words, have certain affordances that we can only understand if we look at how they are made use of by people. In this way, affordances not only constrain and enable certain activities and uses, they are also present in relation to kinds of usage. This is what Hutchby highlights from Gibson's theory when stating that affordances are both "functional" and "relational" (2001). In this way the notion of affordances aims to bypass the weaknesses of "social shaping of technology" theses as well as theories of media that are technologically deterministic.

Daniel Miller is one scholar who has developed this notion within the field of digital anthropology, arguing that internet comes into being through a combination of how people make use of its certain applications in a given social and cultural context and the ways these applications are configured. With Don Slater, he uses the case of Facebook in Trinidad to elaborate this view (Miller & Slater, 2000). Nancy Baym's work on social media also highlights this intersection between the technical capacities of web applications like Facebook and social, personal, and cultural influences (Baym, 2010). Additionally, Dana Boyd's work on "social network sites" proposes the term "networked publics" as publics that are restructured by networked technologies. That is:

Networked publics' affordances do not dictate participants' behavior, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants' engagement. In essence, the architecture of a particular environment matters and the architecture of networked publics is shaped by their affordances (Boyd, 2010: 1).

Furthermore, just as people make apparent the affordances of web applications through their usage, they also make choices about which applications to use on the basis of which affordances an application has. The implication of this is that people choose between various media forms that are neither neutral nor determining, but rather constraining/enabling as well as actively taken up in particular ways. In my analysis of the web applications my respondents use, I look at how they make the choice to use certain

applications for their purposes, and how they prefer to take up certain applications over others at these moments (Madianou and Miller, 2013). I also investigate the everyday uses of internet in my respondents' lives in LA with the aim of understanding how the relationship between technology and social life is developing for a generation in the process of positioning themselves in their own ways among families, peers and with respect to the public institutions around them.

The rise of a "the network society" (Castells, 2000), and "networked individualism" (Wellman, 2002) suggest the causative role of networked digital technologies in societal changes. Miller argues that rather than internet technologies being the driving force behind social and cultural changes, they are extensions of already-existing aspirations that people have (Miller, 2011). While it highlights the agency of internet *users*,¹⁹ Miller's approach differs subtly from perspectives that emphasize the "domestication thesis" (see above) as he analyzes appropriation as more of a two-way power relationship between people and media technologies. While Miller's influential ethnographic approach to internet focuses on technological use by people in the field, it also argues that internet has certain affordances that both open up and confine possibilities for types of use. There are links here between media technologies and technologies as systems of power over people, as both offer possibilities and constraint. Bird argues, drawing on Sherry Ortner's work on culture and power, that social systems of culture are as much reproduced through the activity of individuals as they are ideologically constrained (Bird, 2013). I understand Bakardjieva's approach to everyday life and internet as seeing these constraints and possibilities in terms of users' sense of empowerment and alienation, stating that "both alienation and empowerment can be detected in the daily practices of Internet use" (Bakardjieva, 2005:

¹⁹ Taking people's everyday lives seriously has partly led to the shift towards seeing people as *users* rather than "audiences," notwithstanding the valuable media scholarship on active media audiences that has been drawn on to develop new understandings of media *use*.

64).²⁰ I follow these approaches to internet and culture as based on affordances and limits, agency and constraint.

As part of my discussion of internet media in formations of Iranian American selves, I rely on an analysis of my respondents' media and cultural practices to make an argument about social and cultural changes and the role of internet therein. This regards both the changes of Iranian American-ness as my respondents see and develop it within their generation, and changes in internet technologies that have become normal within their young lifetimes and continue to develop. The argument I make therefore is very different than arguments that have highlighted the role of digital networked media as being the driving force behind vast changes in the way society is organized. While I assume that technologies cannot be seen as having a causative role regarding social and cultural changes, the question remains how to understand such changes and their relationship to media technologies. This is why I take a dialectical approach to media; one that acknowledges that outcomes are not technologically predetermined, and thus calls for ethnographic research into usage practices as they unfold under particular circumstances.

Media practices in everyday life

Complicating the question of whether people have power over media or vice versa, some scholars of media have moved towards seeing the agency of media-using actors as constrained and enabled by power structures in effect in everyday situations. Postill's account of Sherry Ortner's influential work on agency, power, and culture is useful for its suggestions for how to understand the role of actors in social processes without neglecting the ways larger structures enable and constrain their actions (Postill, 2010).²¹ Indeed, by

²⁰ Understanding how media develop in conjunction with cultural processes has for many scholars meant a turn towards studying internet within the context of everyday life. This has led to a variety of approaches to studying internet within this "everyday life" approach (see María Bakardjieva, 2011 for an overview).

²¹ Developing practice theory with relation to media, Postill states of Ortner's contribution to practice theory that "[s]he found Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony' more useful than Foucault's totalizing account of

adopting an approach oriented towards practices when studying media I aim to do justice to Hobart's claim that, "recognition of the complexity of the lived world is what anthropologists can contribute to media studies debates"(Hobart, 2010: 56). I am sympathetic to Hobart's call for including media-related-practices (which he distinguishes from media practices or media-oriented-practices) as I analyze a broad range of my respondents' practices – including those that are not *oriented* towards media (or internet specifically). For example, a young woman's neglect of updating her own website because of lack of technical skills, or the impending closing-down of an Iranian bookshop and the elderly owner's lamentations about internet, or two young men's initiation of a print publication about Iranian diaspora cultural because internet is not the ideal medium for their project are all instances of internet-related practices though not being oriented towards internet per se. I also do not define practice in opposition to discourse (or people's reflections on or accounts of their practices), which gives rise to my focus on a range of *discursive practices* of media use.

Investigating people's practices allows researchers to try to understand the meanings that develop around the use of technology in any given context. In this way, my approach to internet is one focused not only on usage, but also meanings of this usage for people themselves. Practices are "the embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence, and flair," as Posthill defines them in the context of media (Postill, 2010: 1). He places the role of the body central to the field of "practice theory" within which he situates his work, stating that "practice theory is a body of work about the work of the body" (2010: 11), the body being the site at which the agency of the individual and the confining structures of society are concentrated. I therefore follow the long line of anthropologists who have focused on "media practices" as a means to understand social and cultural processes, including an emphasis on embodied practices of

disciplinary power (hegemony, for Gramsci, is 'strongly controlling but never complete or total')(Postill, 2010). This gives an idea of the inspiration for how to see power relations in the context of everyday constraints of media use in his approach to media practices. This also implies parallels with Bakardjieva's understanding "everyday life" in her approach to internet in everyday life.

engaging with mediated messages *and* technological devices, thus developing the field of media studies that also theorizes the materiality of media.

Definitions of practice in media studies remain debated and somewhat open-ended, having far-reaching epistemological implications (Bräuchler & Postill, 2010), and this is equally true for notions of “the everyday” or “everyday life.” Indeed, as anthropologist of internet media, Gabriella Coleman points out, “digital media have extended their reach into the mundane heart of everyday life” (2010: 488). At the same time, however, Bird’s discussion of “the mediated moment” invokes Liisa Malkki’s work to argue that “we might also learn through examining moments that break up the everyday flow and bring people together to marvel, laugh, or discuss” (Bird, 2013: 96). I am interested in my respondents’ practices of the everyday as well as the moments that break it up and make it the object of reflection. I therefore focus on the mundane of the everyday as well as its breaches. This contrasts with research that has focused on a particular forum, platform, website, or application – an approach to which most studies carried out in the developed, Western world are limited. This avoids reifying users into a single role, as some scholars have warned against, in favor of situating people’s uses of technologies within dynamic relationships that include multiple media forms and broader cultural practices (see Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006).

I also acknowledge that media-related practices themselves change with the development of new technologies (Postill, 2011). The sense in which I apply the term *use* here is therefore in accordance with critical perspective offered by Pfaffenberger, which takes as a starting point an anthropology of technology that sees technology as shaping people’s ways of being through the uses to which they are put (Pfaffenberger, 1988). He draws on the work of Marx and Engels to see the use of technology as sustaining certain modes of production while in the same process bringing about certain patterns in human activity and changes therein (Pfaffenberger, 1988). I draw inspiration from these perspectives, bringing them together with the perspectives from media anthropology and science and technology studies that see media and culture as mutually configured by/configuring social

activities outlined above in the cultural mediation framework.²² I observe practices as part of ongoing (technological and social) change.

These changing roles of usage also link to the work of media anthropologists and media studies scholars that propose understanding media as environments. Namely, media environments are where everyday practices of media usage and other connected practices take shape, and are important for what they tell us about people's agentic choices for one form of media over another, and about the particular affordances of a particular media form over another. This has been theorized in different ways from different disciplinary perspectives. "Polymedia" is the term Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller have used to theorize media as an environment in which people take up particular media forms or applications (Madianou & Miller, 2012). Nick Couldry furthers this by stating that "media ecologies" or "environments" have become a commonplace way of analyzing media worlds (Couldry, 2010).

This reflects a range of media that seem inextricable from one another in any absolute sense. What the notion of "polymedia" does in particular is explicitly foreground the choices that actors make between different media forms, which make up the repertoires of communication and sociality. This inter-relation between multiple media forms is emphasized also in "mediatization" research (Hepp & Krotz, 2014).²³ In media and

²² Some would refer to this as a soft determinist perspective as it attributes to the technology a role that leads societal changes in a certain direction because of having certain technological characteristics. While preserving an interest in the particularities of media practice, this perspective also highlights how technologies may give rise to a kind of technological feedback loop that shapes the direction of societal changes. The important work of Pfaffenburger as well as that of MacKenzie & Wajcman (1999) have rescued an area of analysis from accusations of technological determinism by drawing especially on the work of Marx to argue that technology is far from neutral, but develops under conditions that are politically, and economically contingent in the first place and are therefore socially shaped and developed in accordance with inequalities in decision-making and power inequalities at their outset. My approach draws on both anthropological approaches that see media as material culture with an idea of technology as a "total social phenomenon" (Pfaffenberger, 1988), such that both seem to suggest a mutual "structuration" drawing on Giddens' (1984) notion (Miller, 2007 (first published in 1982); Pfaffenberger, 1992).

²³ I understand the focus on mediatization to be different than the study of the process of mediation itself, without the latter necessarily precluding the former. Lundby refers to the difference between mediation and mediatization not being mutually exclusive, while also referencing his different concept of mediation in the context of research on religion (see Lundby's support of Andreas Hepp's account of the relationship between

communication studies, the notion of mediatization became influential in the 1990s for describing the way life (private, institutional, political, etc.) is increasingly lived through media, and how modern media saturation signals interconnected social/cultural and communicative/media change.²⁴ This recent surge of interest in mediatization is concerned with the changes that come about with the increasing reach and ubiquity of media messages and devices into various aspects of people's everyday lives (e.g. politics, religion, migration, etc.) (Hjavarð, 2013; Krotz & Hepp, 2011). In the following section I go into how the notion of field is useful for thinking about transnationally construed media environments, both methodologically and conceptually.

Social fields and doing fieldwork

Media and the field

In the 1990s, scholars began claiming that a concept of culture as dynamic and contextual calls for methodological approaches that encompass this range of complexity. Multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1995) was proposed, and the problems of how to study cultural flows and movement were raised (Appadurai, 1996). Culture is more complex to study than a bounded society in a single site, and so, theorizations of the field made more room to include holistic analysis of cultural practices together with what it means to live in a

the two concepts in *Mediatized Worlds*, p.22). Mediatization research emphasizes the importance of change and transformation, specifically societal change in line with a certain "media logic" (Couldry, 2008).²³ (See Couldry, 2008 for an in-depth analysis of the strengths of the mediation and mediatization concepts from a communication science perspective, explored with reference to the case of "digital storytelling"). Theories of culture and technology that see these two things as being in a constant state of flux and change suggest that the study of cultural mediation is as much concerned with continual *change* as mediatization research (if not necessarily with particular, non-continual *changes* that take place at certain historical moments), with attention to the dialectical relationship between transformations in social meanings and technology.²³ I return to mediatization approaches later on in this chapter when discussing Andreas Hepp's concept of the "mediatized migrant."

²⁴ As Hepp and Krotz note in their Introduction in *Mediatized Worlds: Culture and Society in a Media Age* (Hepp & Krotz, 2014), mediatization is a much older term than its rise in the 1990s within the media and communications literature suggests. The broader sense it has been used in prior to the recent abundance of digital media has more parallels to the discussion of "mediation" I presented above.

mediated world (Bird, 2013).²⁵ I define the social field of practices of being Iranian American by its occupation with issues of cultural politics, family relations, collective organizing, cultural transmission, media representations, and emotional engagements. This social field is where my respondents, seek out, find, and develop a sense of belonging, and through doing fieldwork I observe and engage with this social field.

The site of my fieldwork is the city of Los Angeles, and I was interested in the lives of my respondents residing there. These lives unfolded in a range of settings in the city, from people's houses, to college campuses, to workplaces, to stores and restaurants, to the cars they drive in between these places, to gatherings of various sizes and kinds, in living rooms, in parks, in cultural centers, libraries, museums and galleries, cinemas, and on street corners. These settings are where I followed my respondents. In addition, part of being in the field I was constantly using media. I visited the websites people told me about, watched the various ethnic media channels available to them in LA, including well-known local radio channels and certain satellite broadcasting, sometimes together with my respondents, as well as being exposed to the myriad of media messages more generally that came with living in LA. This included gathering information from and about websites that my respondents used. I did this by saving textual and visual content, often in the form of screenshots.²⁶

Furthermore, through email, messaging, and social media applications, my respondents and I got in touch and communicated with one another. Through these channels I learned about events and through web telephony and instant chat, I stayed in contact with some of them after leaving LA or during times they were away. Not simply because my research

²⁵ However, see Hine's work for a critique of holism in the endeavour of virtual ethnography and an embrace of partiality (Hine, 2000).

²⁶ Both screenshots and copy-pasted material from websites were copied into word processing document formats and later imported to the qualitative data analysis program I was using to organize and code the rest of my interview and observational material. Newer versions of such programs have the functionality of directly downloading material from websites and code segments of images (e.g. Nvivo 10). This was more difficult to do in the version of the program that I was using. Hence, screenshots were coded as whole images, and closer analysis of their content was done without the functionality of the program. Videos were generally not downloaded into the database but the links to particular videos were saved.

concerned internet and media but also because these web applications were, and increasingly are becoming, the standard tools of fieldwork. The abundance of various forms of media use as part of fieldwork practices speaks to the ubiquity of media in almost any field of contemporary ethnographic investigation. When it comes to internet and studying the various ways it is accessed by users through social media platforms for instance, the technological advancements have particular implications for fieldwork. As John Postill and Sarah Pink state:

For the internet ethnographer, the implications of the shift to web 2.0 and the rapid growth of social media platforms, applications, practices and activity are three-fold. They create new sites for ethnographic fieldwork, foster new types of ethnographic practice, and invite critical perspectives on the theoretical frames that dominate internet studies, thus providing opportunities for re-thinking internet research methodologically (Postill & Pink, 2012: 124).

I accessed my respondents' web- and wider internet-use mostly by engaging with them through it. This included being Facebook and Twitter contacts, exchanging emails and photos, chatting online, reading one another's blog postings, etc. But it also meant at times observing them engaging with others through these applications. This took the form of them showing me photos they shared on social media via their smartphone in a café, or being in the rooms of their houses as they showed me web videos or blogs they watch and follow, or just seeing how they interact with one another in groups around a laptop, for instance. I also listened to how they talked about using internet, which also meant asking questions about internet and its meanings in a variety of different settings and with various degrees of structure and formality.

This use of internet as research tool is by no means to detract from the role of casual telephone conversations about where and when to meet, as well as interviews I conducted on the phone with people, and indeed in face-to-face settings. I return to this at the end of this chapter when I describe my respondents more elaborately. Basically, the field as defined in this research is one that media is inherent to. Taking the social field in which

Iranian American-ness is formed as a unit of study, I follow people, their practices, and the connections they make with other people, places, and things as guiding principle for delineating the field. And following people in this way meant using a variety of media while reflecting on this usage as part of the research process. The field site is implicated in transnational circuits of information, affect, and imaginations that extend beyond the bounds of the physical places in which I carried out this research. And seeing these circulations of meaning as integral to the field of practices that constitute Iranian American self-formation is essential to how I understand the role of media in the field, as I explain further in the following.

Migration and social fields

The 1990s and early 2000s saw a boom in work on transnational migration and diaspora that prepared new ground in this field of research (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994; Clifford, 2011; Cohen, 1997; Faist, Fauser, & Reisenauer, 2013; Hall, 2003; Ong & Nonini, 1996; Portes, 1997; Rouse, 1991; Sassen, 1999; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998; Tölölyan, 1996; Vertovec, 2001; Werbner, 2002; see also the later Clifford, 2011 and Bauböck & Faist, 2010). It was a response to new kinds of migrant flows, which required terminologies that the existing migration studies frameworks did not offer. This body of work introduced transnational approaches that dislodged the unspoken primacy of the nation state in migration research, and re-conceptualized diaspora to extend beyond a prototypical model of characteristics shared by groups of dispersed peoples. Diaspora became more of a “consciousness,” a mode of identification (as I elaborate below), and migration conceptualized through flows and “social fields” rather than nation-state entities. Rather than explaining specific processes, these were breakthroughs on how to better conceptualize migrant identities and frame the study of migration. These contributions have since become established insights in migration studies in contexts of migration and multi-culture, and together they highlight how the nation is a construct situated amidst other crosscutting loci of identification, not an absolute unit of study or identification.

The notion of “transnational social fields” (Basch et al., 1994; Levitt & Schiller, 2006; Levitt & Waters, 2002; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998) was proposed and used as a way of talking about the activities of migrants across nation state borders, defining these activities not as fragmented experiences but as constituting “a single field of social relations”(Basch et al., 1994). This perspective does not hold local ethnic or long-distance national identifications as exclusive of one another, nor as static and self-evident. Instead identifications with a range of social categories are seen as having the capacity to subvert state discourses of national identity.²⁷ Following closely from this, a specific focus also emerged on the particular issues that faced the children of migrants who were either born in their country of residence or arrived there at a very young age. Termed second-generation migrants, the scholarship focused on what this new generation’s lives meant for theoretical discussions and policy issues revolving around migrant identity, transnational lives, integration, and assimilation (Alba & Nee, 2005; Crul & Vermeulen, 2006; Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001; Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, & Waters, 2006; Kasinitz, 2004; Levitt & Waters, 2006; A Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Alejandro Portes, 1997; Purkayastha, 2005; Skrbiš, Baldassar, & Poynting, 2007; Thomson & Crul, 2007; Waldinger & Perlmann, 1998; Wolf, 2006).²⁸ These studies pointed out the tendency among the children of migrants to claim their parents’ country of birth as a “homeland” and engage in practices that connect them to this distant place. This made the important argument that transnational social fields were sustained over generations, and would therefore maintain conceptual relevance.

The idea of migrants living in social fields²⁹ that cross borders problematized notions of assimilation that had assumed that migrants would gradually lose their attachments with

²⁷ As Levitt and Glick Schiller write, “We define social field as a set of multiple inter locking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed {see also Glick Schiller and Fouron, 1999; Glick Schiller, 1999, 2003}” (Levitt & Schiller, 2006)

²⁸ This was essentially a body of work that looked at people with south to north migrant backgrounds, focusing on North American and European countries’ second-generation migrant populations. The interest in these groups seems to have been driven by public discourses regarding “integration” and the social and economic “problems” caused by intensified migration flows to the West that intensified at this time and forcefully continue to the present day.

the “country of origin” in a linear fashion over successive generations while becoming more culturally indistinguishable from the “host” country majority. Kasinitz’s and others’ (Kasinitz et al., 2006; Kasinitz, 2004) sociological research on US immigration – which was limited by US national borders but compared a variety of migrant groups with one another – showed that hypotheses of linear cross-generational assimilation did not suffice. They failed to explain how those who were one or two generations removed from the experience of their family’s initial transnational migration identified with their familial “homelands.” Such models of linear cross-generation assimilation also did not explain how the second generation’s affiliations with such a “homeland” was not necessarily a threat to the social, cultural, economic, and political incorporation of this generation into their country of residence. In contrast, transnational social fields perspectives overcame these shortcomings by arguing that “assimilation and enduring transnational ties are neither incompatible nor binary opposites” (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2006).

Another strength of a social fields approach is that it provides a framework for seeing the situational formation of transnational selves as hinging on sets of changing factors (e.g. life cycles see Levitt & Waters, 2002). Hence, migrant selves remain in a perpetual state of formation depending on these situational factors; for example, circular migration, continued migration of new migrants from the same “homeland,” migration policy changes. Furthermore, this perspective includes the changing circulation of messages and their publics. Like the notion of a “transnational migrant circuit” (Rouse, 1991: 14), social fields mean acknowledging that mass and small media messages are involved in the formation of migrant selves as they create transnational migrant publics, with people and messages moving back and forth rather than constituting a unidirectional flow or singular movement. This role that media plays in such circuits goes beyond social interactions and creates “transnational spaces of orientation” (Yang, 2002: 197) in much the same way Anderson’s imagined communities are created without their members socially interacting with one another. Work inspired by frameworks of transnationalism in migration studies have made

mention of the role of burgeoning media forms in creating the transnational social fields that the second generation live within (e.g. Levitt & Waters, 2002), but have until very recently tended not to focus specifically on the role of the diversifying forms of digital media.

It is within these social fields that I study my respondents' self-formation practices. I follow work that has brought the insights of a social fields perspective to bear on migrant's digital media usage. Horst and Millers' work on Jamaican mobile phone usage has been unique in this regard. This social fields approach helps to show how practices of social networking among people through mobile phones further traditional practices of networking in Jamaica, and become integral to transnational remittance flows within families (Horst & Miller, 2006). Horst's work also situates itself amidst the growing body of work that focuses on digital communications media for migrants, pointing out that much of it does not offer insight into how new technologies change migrants' everyday lives (Horst, 2006). With my research I aim to follow Horst and others in trying to understand how my respondent's lives are influenced by seeing their digital media usage as constitutive of transnational social fields, and specify what implications this has for their ways of being Iranian American. I bring together this social fields perspective with a perspective on cultural identification and media that seeks to encompass what makes identities real for people.

From different disciplinary perspectives, scholars have covered migrants' internet use in the context of dispersal that comes with migration and increased transnational flows. Internet has been argued by some as overcoming the dispersal and distance of conditions of migration. Diminescu's notion of the "connected migrant" as discussed earlier in this chapter is an important instance of this. The collaborative work of Andreas Hepp has furthered this idea by arguing, on the basis of cases of migrants in Germany, for the concept of the "mediatized migrant." This encompasses a wider range of media than internet and in line with what I described earlier, sees media as part of an environment, one that fosters a

“communicative connectivity” (Hepp, Bozdag, & Suna, 2011).³⁰ The idea that seems to underpin this and much work on internet and diaspora is that diaspora communities are particularly prescient of the internet’s rise because of their geographic dispersal coupled with their connectivity to one another through communication.

This idea was also integral to the early work on internet. The influential work of internet scholar Howard Rheingold has described connections as allowing experiences of physical location to become “accidents of proximity” (see Rheingold, 1993: 65, referring to the visions of internet’s/ARPANET’s first founders’ visions of connectivity and the experiences of members of a “virtual community” message board).³¹ This begs the question of how migrants connect with their “accidental” physical surroundings in such a context, since other research on digital media and migrants highlights how transnational connections through media do not suggest disconnection from the society in which migrants live their daily lives.

For instance, Dayan draws on Naficy’s discussion of exile satellite television (in which Naficy argues that Iranian exile television helps produce a liminal state that eventually leads to further integration into American society) to point out that “particularistic media are not always instruments of a secession”(Dayan, 2002: 110). That is, questions about whether internet is helping to “integrate” second-generation migrants into the host society

³⁰ “When we reflect in the following the communicative connectivity of mediatized migrants, we understand by this such a totality of interrelated mass-mediated and personal communicative connections. They are not articulated by the appropriation of a single media but by the interference of different media in the whole repertoire of a person” (Hepp et al., 2011)

³¹ This quote from Kirshenblatt Gimblett’s piece on diaspora brings Clifford and Rheingold’s visions together. “Increasingly, however, as distance becomes a function of time, the instantaneity of telecommunications produces a vivid sense of hereness and interactivity the feeling of presence. The result is an extreme case of physical immateriality of place. New spaces of dispersal are produced – traversed and compressed – by theologies of connection and telepresence. Physical location can be experienced as accidents of proximity, while common interests, rather than common location can become the basis for social life in a medium where location is not defined by geographical coordinates but by the topic of conversation” (Rheingold, 1992). There is a convergence between diaspora as we understand it from Clifford’s account and the spaces of dispersal defined and mediated by communication technologies. It is at this convergence that we might rethink diaspora”(Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994)

(presupposing that they lack integration) are much more complex to answer than simply looking at whether these young people use internet to make long distance connections with Iran or with other diaspora Iranians (or not). It is more important to understand the processes through which young people engage with and give meaning to their internet use in a transnational context that includes various forms of national and subnational identifications and forms of belonging. Paying attention to the environment in which migrants live their daily lives, I move on to discuss the implications of studying migrants and their media usage along the lines of the chosen themes (mentioned earlier) in the specific context of LA.

Fieldwork in media and migration hub, Los Angeles

There are a number of ways in which LA represents a global media hub. First, LA has become an influential reference point for Iranian American-ness globally. Maghbouleh notes that the LA Iranian culture industry also has some influence inside Iran (2012). For the second generation, the sheer concentration of Iranians in the city has shaped the development of Iranian-ness in this context. Because of the distinct presence of Iranian Americans in many urban neighborhoods in and around LA County, Mahdi has argued, the second generation's identification as "Iranian" is strengthened by being surrounded with other Iranians, citing ease of language transmission and retention as one of the results of this (Mahdi, 1998). Naficy's work has shown how the particularities of Los Angeles are important to understand – especially the way the city itself has shaped and been shaped by immigration patterns. The early development of LA's Westside reflected economic competition with Downtown LA, making today's LA landscape rather two-headed. Both centers are steeped in affluence and reflect what has been argued is an approach to urban planning and architecture that excludes the poor and working classes (Davis, 1992). The experience of living in and moving through the various spaces of the city makes this rather clear. Furthermore, the Westside emerged in the 1920s as a (European) Jewish center as a result of the film industry's (mainly Protestant) exclusion of this group despite their wealth

(Davis, 1992). It experienced an influx of Jewish immigrants during the second World War (Fine, 2004).

This was combined with a new middle- and upper-class population (Fine, 2004). “Multiethnic from the beginning, but dominated by the Anglo-Protestant downtown plutocracy, Los Angeles in the 1920s was moving towards its present configuration – massive westward spread, Westside affluence, and increasing racial and class segregation along east-west lines”, writes Fine (2004: 12). It was mostly within the affluent Westside that my research activities were most concentrated, but spanned from Orange County to the Valley with many stops between. The Westside was the area of LA to which Iranian Jews gravitated upon their arrival, but experienced some difficulties because of the predominantly Ashkenazi background of the Westside Jews (Jalali, 2005).

The Westside - especially Westwood and Beverly Hills - are, nevertheless, best known today for their largely Jewish Iranian population concentrations and their affluence. East LA, by contrast, is known for its large Hispanic populations, and relatively a less wealthy and working-class demographic. By 1930 East Los Angeles constituted the nation’s largest Mexican barrio, booming in the early 20th century with the key period in the city’s industrialization (Romo, 1983). Iranian American respondents who work, live, and grew up in this part of the city have a qualitatively different experience than their West LA counterparts, as do those whose families call South Central or other parts of LA home. The spaces of the city form everyday life and second generation subjects’ positions with regard to the class and racial/ethnic diversity within LA and among the Iranian Americans in it.

Much of the work done on Iranians in the US between the late 1980s and early 1990s was on Iranians in Los Angeles, California (Bozorgmehr, 1998: 14). Perhaps most significantly this included Kelley and Friedlander’s *Irangenes: Iranians in Los Angeles* (1993), Naficy’s *Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (1993) and Waldinger and Bozorgmehr’s *Ethnic Los Angeles* (Bozorgmehr & Waldinger, 1996). This work, in turn, contributed to solidifying the presence of Iranians in Los Angeles (see Feher, 1998; Jalali, 2005). It is noteworthy that most of this scholarship on Iranians in LA came from researchers and

institutions based in Los Angeles and California, many of whom were Iranian themselves, lending not only a self-contained quality to the city and its relationship to this particular immigrant population, but also a merging of scientific and social dynamics around notions of being Iranian in LA.

Second, LA is a national and international center for media production in the US between major news outlets to the Hollywood production studios. Powdermaker's 1950 ethnography of cultural producers in the Hollywood movie industry points out how these films are a "uniquely influential institution in US society" (Mahon, 2000: 48). In addition to this, she outlines how cultural producers act within a social system in which economic forces and artistic goals are in tension with one another. This reveals the links to the present day. The designation of LA as a media production center and oftentimes internationally synonymous with Hollywood means that Iranian Americans find themselves in close proximity to a film industry that shapes their lives in direct and indirect ways. Through mass media representations of Iran and Iranian Americans and Middle Easterners, but also by being at the centre of where American-ness is shaped by the film industry and the "dreams it manufactures" (Powdermaker, 1950: 11). A large part of Powdermaker's research discussed the social systems that the Hollywood film industry produced. Although the music industry is not mentioned, this is another major part of the global commercial cultural production emanating from LA. Contemporary California is also a global center and place of genesis when it comes to the ICT industry. This industry comes to produce its own social systems. One way in which this is relevant to this research is through the archetypal venture capitalism-fuelled tech start-up, and the ways it is sometimes promoted as part of activist liberation.³²

³² Scholars from various disciplines have pointed to the ways in which the beginnings and developments of networked digital technologies in California have become entwined with notions of communitarianism and an idealized vision of "community", millennialism, pioneering in a new world, and the fundamental transformation of society mixed in with elements of the transcendental, but also how this has undergone change and continuity over time (Agre, 2002; Turner, 2010; Zandbergen, 2011)

The expansiveness of the tech industry (and important part of the California state economy) means that Iranian Americans and other ethnic minorities are increasingly a part of the workforce of this industry at different levels. From the heralded CEO of Google and the head of eBay, to the youthful employees who were interviewed at the Facebook headquarters as part of CNN's coverage of the role of Facebook in the 2009 elections, Sepideh who worked for Google's Santa Monica branch, to tech blogger and author Cyrus who grew up in Santa Monica, Iranian Americans and the second generation are among those who not only use internet applications, but are sometimes in a position to shape their technical development and the discourses around them as either professionals in the area of web development or as tech journalists who cover these developments. Seeing subjects as active in the ways technologies develop on technical and discursive levels is important given the role of such actors in the history of internet's development (see Agre, 2002; Turner, 2010) rather than only consumers and producers of content at the level of general usership. While I see these roles as part of the varied functions of usership described earlier, there are also roles that are particular to the condition of living in proximity to media and technology hubs within California.

Finally, the city is an important infrastructural node for telecommunications. The economic geography of internet has been argued to reflect a global tendency towards the concentrated development of internet backbone networks around the already-existing telecommunications and other urban infrastructure of world cities (Malecki, 2009). This supports speculations about the role of world cities in the development of global internet connectivity by such prominent theorists such as Emanuel Castells (Castells, 2000) and Saskia Sassen (1995). However, as Townsend suggests, empirical investigation of these ideas was lacking as much as the lacking empirical investigation of opposite claims, such as Nicholas Negroponte's (1995) ideas that internet's development would lead to a decentralization rather than a centralization of communications technologies around already-established urban nodes (Townsend, 2001). As technologies spread, this empirically grounded work has fuelled debates over which explanatory models best measure the changing processes of internet's centralization around global cities versus

other locales. And what has emerged is increased attention for the dynamics of inequality within (global) cities themselves. As Townsend presents the startling finding that, Los Angeles' distribution of domain names, in comparison to San Francisco's, for instance, are much more unevenly distributed, specifically because "immigrant and minority neighborhoods show little internet activity. Within the San Francisco area, the difference in domain name density between academic Berkeley and poor, ethnic Oakland is hardly on the scale that separates South Central Los Angeles from the affluent Westside" (Townsend, 2001: 53).³³

It is therefore important to note that the patterns of uneven distribution of internet access and usage across Los Angeles means that the Westside focus of my investigation comes with its particularities that should not be assumed to carry for the rest of Los Angeles. I spent my fieldwork period staying in a visiting various parts of what is officially The Greater Los Angeles Area. This area refers to a region that includes 5 counties, including Los Angeles County, Orange County, San Bernardino County, Riverside County, and Ventura County, the combined populations of which give Los Angeles its megacity status. The city's population within the Metropolitan Area and the Greater Los Angeles area, make it the second largest in the country after New York, based on a 2005 US Census estimate. The Los Angeles Metropolitan Area – where I ended up spending most of my time and where most of my respondents also tended to spend most of their time – contains various parts, some of which are officially "unincorporated" parts of LA City, such as East Los Angeles. Generally speaking, the city is divided into: Downtown LA, the Eastside and Northeast LA, South Central, the Harbor Area, Wilshire, Hollywood, the Westside, and the San Fernando Valley Area. The research took me to meet people and attend events located across most of these areas, with a concentration in the Westside and Wilshire where most of the gatherings took place and where several of my respondents, lived, worked, and studied.

³³ Townsend has also argued vigorously that the dependency between cities (rather than competition) that comes with interconnected networks of communications technologies are shaping relationships and hierarchies between cities in more complex ways than a global cities thesis allows (Townsend, 2001a; 2001b).

Respondent-users

In this book I tell a story about a number of young people I got to know during approximately a year in LA. I analyze how they position themselves with respect to the significant forces and actors around them. How they relate and respond to 1) their parents and influential older members of “the Iranian American community,” 2) their counterparts back in Iran, 3) Americans in the US – including a range of other “minority” groups – and 4) other parts of the second generation in LA and other places in the world. These other parties and actors exert influences on these young people concerning how they (should) live their lives. I selected my key respondents for a variety of intersecting reasons. They are not meant to be representatives – as individuals or in sum – of any second generation of Iranian immigrants. What they have in common is that they are all internet users, they are all children of parents whose migration is responsible for their presence in the US (rather than having been old enough to make that decision themselves), they almost all consistently identify as Iranian and American in some combination and to some degree or other, and they have all lived (or plan to live) in Los Angeles for an extended amount of time (years). And in these ways, they are typical of so many children of Iranian immigrants in Los Angeles.

In addition, they are mostly people who play a unique and active role in contributing to how Iranian American-ness is articulated in LA (whether among their friends and family, fans and followers, or wider publics), a task which also most often involves digital media in some capacity. They do this as educators, artists, intellectuals, students, photographers, poets, organizers, activists, DJs, filmmakers, and other kinds of professionals. Though not all necessarily “community leaders” in any formal sense, I would say that many of them certainly are cultural leaders in putting their own formations of Iranian American-ness into practice, and giving form to Iranian American-ness through these practices. According to Levitt and Glick Schiller’s distinction between ways of “being” and “belonging” in/to transnational fields, these people are those who are not only “being” Iranian American

(through social interactions that place them in the social fields joining Iran and the US) but are also “belonging” to a transnational Iranian American social field (which includes making a conscious connection with an identity label, “combining action and awareness”) (Levitt & Schiller, 2006: 11). That is, for the most part, they are invested in labels and cultural politics in this field; they show a conscious connection to the field and exhibit concrete actions along such lines. This as opposed to coming from Iranian American families but evading identification as Iranian American or finding the label irrelevant to their lives.

However, as Levitt and Glick Schiller also acknowledge, this conscious engagement is not constant. While engagement with the label, Iranian American, gives rise to a wide range of practices on the part of most of my respondents, I also noticed how they struggled not to be seen, for instance, as “an Iranian American artist/musician” but someone who does good work (e.g. makes music) and who also happens to be Iranian American. My respondents are attuned to this variety in positionings professionally, publicly, and personally. I focus on their practices of stretching, reshaping, and re-appropriating this label to fit and include them. My respondents are people who use the term critically, productively, and often from the margins. That is, they predominantly feel they are not typical Iranians in LA. Despite this self-perception, their high education levels, interest, and predominantly middle-class backgrounds mean that they are well-connected, both with one another and with institutions, organizations, and public debates that implicate them. They mostly represent a minority of a minority, but a potentially highly influential one.

Diaspora as a mode of “consciousness” (as I referenced above) is important, (see especially Clifford, 1994; Gilroy, 1993; see also Vertovec, 2006 and Sreberny, 2000) but this is an aspect I treat here as inseparable from the sociality of relationships and modes of cultural signification or reproduction of meaning around diasporic belonging. This is why I pay attention to people’s practices. Essentially, my respondents are people for whom the future is at stake in their negotiations of Iranian American-ness. That is, the future of “the Iranian American community” and other collective entities they see themselves a part of, their

personal futures as burgeoning adults, the future of the generations they precede. Following people and tracing their various connections means finding out how my respondents' selves are positioned within this web of connectivity. That is, with relation to groups, people, and other social influences in their environment. By implication this focus also helps reveal where there are disconnects; whether these are evidenced by my respondents' own practices of disconnecting from others around them (such as other Iranian Americans they do not relate to), or whether they are unwittingly disconnected from others (such as older Iranian Americans who do not use the same media), and how they see this (such as resentment about lack of access to larger audiences for personal websites for instance).

A qualitative, ethnographic approach to connections is able to overcome some of the pitfalls of (mostly quantitative) social network analysis. That is, it allows researchers to study links between nodes (people) as dynamic and as having certain qualities and meanings, which goes beyond understanding links between people in terms of dichotomies of either "strong" or "weak ties" (Vertovec, 2006). Living among second-generation Iranian Americans in LA and observing their practices and speaking with them allowed me to follow them through parts of their daily activities, and therefore trace their enacted and discursive connections to people, places, things, and bodies. I did ethnographic research that followed several children of Iranian immigrants in LA and the connections they made, spending time with them in various contexts, asking them about how they use and think about internet in various senses and manifestations – from a website to a listserv, to a social media application, to "the internet" as an entity. I spent 13 months in total (between 2008 and 2012) in LA, and after returning each time it was ever more difficult to say – as anthropologists of all subareas are increasingly noticing – that I had left the field, particularly because of the continued use of internet to stay in touch with friends and contacts I met and myself developed connections with along the way. I also returned to the field for over a month in 2013 where I presented some of my findings to an audience that included some of my respondents, as well as had informal conversations and shared parts of my writing for comments as part of efforts towards respondent validation.

I started by approaching a wide range of people, and thus my fieldwork included meeting and conducting interviews with both first- and second-generation Iranian Americans in LA. These conversations produced records of approximately 80 interviews varying in length from 30 minutes to 4 hours. This material was supplemented by material from my field notes, taken at dozens of events as well as based on shorter and sometimes more informal conversations I had with people there. I also took photographs of these events, as well as of other media forms (such as print booklets and sign boards). I use a small selection of these photos in this book for illustration purposes. My notes also cover some of the interactions with a few of the young people I befriended more closely and whose family and friends I met and whose lives I became a part of for a longer time than the fieldwork period. This included, for instance, a friend I came to share an apartment with for several months, but also others who I have continued exchanges with. When writing up the accounts my respondents shared with me in this book, I most often use people's real names. In cases in which people I have spoken with asked me not to reveal their identities, I have used pseudonyms. However, I noticed that when engaging with versions of my work-in-progress, some respondents could recognize themselves and one another despite the use of these pseudonyms. So in cases where I intended to better ensure anonymity, personal details, dates, or links to websites have been omitted. (the next sentence is not complete and unclear) I have taken into account that when using verbatim quotes from online sources, internet searchability makes these statements (when made on publicly accessible websites) traceable, and may make the authors of such statements more easily identifiable. In cases where online statements were not publicly accessible and I have used screenshots, I have anonymized names of authors.

Upon beginning the research I quickly developed a heightened awareness of the fact that so many of those I would like to speak with for my research were, themselves, either conducting academic research having to do with Iranian diaspora or related issues, or held and active stake in issues of academic and other public representation of Iranian Americanness. Accessing and including their perspectives in this analysis therefore was also a matter of negotiation of obligations that my respondents emphasized to "the Iranian American

community.” This was a “community” of which I was, myself, often implicated as being a part. My own background made this self-evident in many ways. Being a child of Iranian migrants, it was clear when I introduced myself to people that I was immediately seen by name, appearance, and interest to be an insider to Iranian American-ness. My bilingual upbringing and entirely English-language education and recognition of Western cultural reference points immediately made me a convincing (Iranian) American to many of the Iranians and others I met in LA.

However, my insider status was often called into question when my background was revealed as being a resident of the Netherlands, having grown up in Sydney, Australia, and in fact never having lived in the United States. However, I did not notice this bringing any evident hindrances. On the contrary, my positioning as a researcher also made it possible for me to see and analyze American-ness from the perspective of an outsider without being seen as a complete foreigner. Nevertheless, my insider/outsider positioning brought with it disadvantages in another sense, especially in some conversations with members of the first generation that I met.

Being of the second generation I was perhaps naïve about some people’s expectations and categorizations of my own political and personal agenda. Only after some time in the field did I come to understand why I had been initially received with apprehension by some after. For instance, I was told by some first-generation graduate students that they had assumed me to be a spy for the Iranian government sent to track their student organizing activities. Only after getting to know them over time did they reveal their deep, former suspicions. Other experiences with older members of the first generation of Iranian Americans placed me in situations where I felt I was expected to meet a higher standard than a non-Iranian ethnographer would have. My knowledge and language skills *as an Iranian* were scrutinized by other Iranians I spoke with for the research, which did not always lend itself to me being seen as a legitimate researcher and my project as worthy. The greater mutual understanding (despite different kinds of scrutiny) with the second generation may have led me to more easily access their accounts and modes of web use.

This is not to say that the first generation as a whole, or the older members of it did not feature in my field data. I interviewed and otherwise interacted with a wide variety of people from the Iranian “community” in LA, including first-generation Iranian Americans. However, the intention of this investigation is not to be comparative between generations. And my main respondents ended up being a group of about 20 people I conducted in-depth interviews with, and about 10 people who I had repeated contact and closer friendships with and whom I came to rely on as key respondents. I accessed them mainly through youth-oriented organizations for Iranian Americans including student organizations geared toward academic, social, and cultural programming for their members. They also introduced me to one another based on their knowledge of my research interests. Through people I came to know through such organs and individuals, I came into contact with others.

Over time I noticed that most of my respondents saw themselves as somehow different from typical LA Iranians. They expressed this in various ways. Most of my respondents did not see themselves as having the profession or the lifestyle that is typically associated with an image of (the most high-profile) Iranians in LA. Most made an effort to explain how they were different from typical Iranians in LA (such as the stereotypical LA Iranians who identify as “Persian” and live in the relatively wealthy West LA neighborhoods), but also from many Iranians they knew around them. Yet at the same time, all of them did indeed have the high level of education that was typical of Iranian Americans, as well as coming from families and have career prospects where upper-middle class life would be attainable for them. My key respondents also turned out not to include the Iranian Americans who explicitly identified as Jewish. While by far not all Jewish Iranians in LA come from wealthy backgrounds, it was commonplace among those I spoke with to associate the Iranian Jewish population most strongly with the West LA presence of Iranians in the city. Most of my respondents, in contrast, identified as having a Muslim cultural background or being practicing Muslims, very few mentioned having been raised Christian, and for a great many the issue of their own religion self-identification did not come up. While I made efforts to include and access a range of people when conducting fieldwork, I did not select my

respondents so as to make up a representative sample of the religious/ethnic variety of the demographic makeup of LA Iranians.

Structure of the book

As mentioned earlier, I organize the four main ethnographic chapters of this book around these four themes. In Chapter 1, I deal with the various meanings and manifestations of home for my respondents. I ask how relationships to places and ways of being in those places constitute home, and how web usage shapes such relationships. I focus on people's felt and practiced connections to places of various scales in the US and Iran. In doing so, I show how internet media are taken up in certain particularly second-generation styles of feeling and claiming a sense of home. I see formations of home as a significant part of how Iranian American-ness is constituted through web usage. These uses help people forge connections with the city they live in, the long-distance places of home they travel to and imagine, and the intimate places of family they grow up in, move on from, and stay in touch with.

Chapter 2 foregrounds the past and the notions of heritage and remembering. There I focus on the relationships my respondents have to the past. History and heritage are engaged with through objects and stories that refer to Iranian and American pasts and I ask: how do my respondents position themselves with relation to a past that they see as pertaining to them, as their own, and how is this past mediated in ways that speak to these young people? I argue that the ways these connections take shape relies on the styles of remembering that appeal to the second generation, and that they position themselves with the help of their web usage that helps them contest, reframe, and engage critically with the past through the lens of their contemporary experiences of growing up in the US. Their practices also show how the past is mediated through particular narratives and objects alike, such that the materiality of certain things and pre-existing institutions for remembering and heritage maintain their power.

Chapter 3 focuses on race. In it, I investigate how my respondents engage with ways of seeing the body and ways of seeing (and being seen as) Iranian Americans as a group (through various forms of political and media representation). I focus on the question of how my respondents represent their racialized bodies and narrate their experiences of racism through their use of web applications. How do they use the web to position themselves by mediating their experiences of racialization? I argue that certain styles of presenting the racialized body with the use of internet media are particular to the second generation and mobilize emergent forms of collectivity. It shows how these both draw on and disjoin from the previous generation's modes of positioning within a changing context of racial discrimination. In a similar way to notions of home and the past, the issue of race constitutes Iranian American-ness for my respondents, but through a positioning that is only beginning to be discussed in research on Iranian diaspora.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Green uprising in Iran that took place during my fieldwork period in Los Angeles. The chapter starts out by acknowledging the dominant narratives about "social media" circulating around this period, and moves on to focus on my respondents' practices and narratives during the same period. It shows how the events in Iran came to represent a moment in which Iranians in the diaspora came to practice their Iranian-ness, and how my second-generation respondents in particular came to see themselves as connected to Iran and Iranian-ness in ways specific to this moment. It also discusses the role of particular web applications and their use, showing how they offer certain possibilities and how these possibilities are also limited in various ways with regard to the purposes and goals my respondents have. Hence, in each of the chapters, the issue of my respondents' cultural belonging is approached from a different vantage point. Each chapter aims to elaborate upon a particular facet of Iranian American belonging I observed as important in the field and examine how the use of web applications helps mediate that belonging.

Chapter 1 Home

Introduction

Driving with Arash along the wide roads of his quiet neighbourhood in the Valley at night, we passed by the high school he used to attend, saw the house where he lived with his mother and father before their divorce, and traversed the peaceful hills he had escaped to so many times for a change of pace. As I drove, he brought each of the sites to life with his descriptions of times spent and memories made. Significant moments of Arash's younger years were woven into this suburban topography. And as an adult he navigated its familiar spaces effortlessly. At his favorite local establishment he was greeted warmly by the DJ and barman, and the familiar face of an old friend he had grown up with in LA and gone to grad school with on the East coast. There seemed no question that this neighborhood was home for Arash.

Even so, this did not prevent him from being asked the question, "when are you going back to your country?" Arash recounted the awkward experience in 2009, in a coffee shop not far from his family house, where he had returned to live upon coming back from law school in Boston. A teacher had asked him the question during his school years. Now himself an educator and a photographer in his mid-thirties the distance of hindsight allowed him to articulate the question's tacit exclusion towards him; it implicitly prescribed a home in a different and distant land where he would (or perhaps, should) one day return. Arash dismissed this idea. In his usual, thoughtful and articulate way, he explained that the

question of home was far more complex to him than such a premise allowed. To him, home was not self-evident, singular, or fixed.

In ways similar to many of my respondents, Arash's practices root him within the places of his everyday life and upbringing in the Valley, while also placing him within Iranian diaspora networks internationally and across the US via his relationships with friends, kin, and professional contacts. Having lived, worked, and studied in various cities on two coasts of the US, Arash migrated comfortably between the different American locales that had become part of his biography. As for his mobility between the US and Iran these days, it was characterized by temporary travel. This travels had taken him to multiple Iranian cities and brought him closer to friends and family there, some of whom he had traveled with as he developed attachments to new places in Iran as a first-time visitor.

Arash was also deeply involved in networks of Iranian Americans and their creative work in the arts and culture sector. And he developed his contacts with other members of the Iranian American second generation both in and beyond LA through his involvement in cultural events and projects. He mentioned and recommended the websites of Bidoun³⁴ magazine and the blog, jigaram.com, which both have in common a visual arts orientation. The sites approach Iranian-ness through the lens of artistic expression in the diaspora, covering selected societal themes within the Middle East and the US. Arash is also one of the founders of the print publication, *B/taarof*, a magazine and website that offers both digital and print content.³⁵ As another of *B/taarof's* second-generation co-founders (also named Arash) described it in an email, the magazine "features visual arts, critical essays, curated archives, & oral histories of Iran and Iranians across generational and geographic divides." These (partly) internet mediated publications, among other events and projects, situate Arash within networks of Iranian diasporic cultural production.

³⁴ Bidoun.org

³⁵ Btaarof.com

Like Arash, most of my respondents engage with and raise questions of home in a variety of ways. And these include practices of production and discussion that involve the use of web applications; the websites and blogs they set up, the messaging platforms and social media sites they use. These applications offer a way to investigate the role of web usage in formations of home(s) for and by this new generation. Questions of home for second-generation web users has not yet been elaborately dealt with in the scholarship that covers issues of home and Iranian diaspora in the US (see Ghorashi, 2002a; Naficy, 1993, 1998a; Sullivan, 2001). However, Hamid Naficy has argued of internet media and home among (*first-generation*) Iranian exiles in LA that, “[f]or many cosmopolitan ‘homeless’ exiles who are physically displaced, an internet homepage is an attractive method for becoming discursively emplaced” (Naficy, 1998: 4). Writing at a time when web applications had yet to transform into the multifarious forms that are recognizable to my respondents today, Naficy saw internet as alleviating the sense of physical distance that diaspora Iranians experience with relation to Iran. According to Naficy, internet offered discursive emplacement; an internet homepage is able to mitigate the effects of geographic distance by presenting discursive proximity.

In a similar vein, David Morely suggests that the role of internet in formations of home is changing people’s relationships to place. Morely’s influential work on the relationship between media and spaces of home suggests that increased mobility and communications technologies bring about a reconfiguration in people’s relationships to place through the formation of “virtual geographies” (Morely, 2000: 191). In this understanding, a discursive home replaces a physical one, such that a “virtual homeland” or “rhetorical territory” is formed, as applications of Morely’s idea to certain diasporas using internet have argued (Basu, 2006; Mallapragada, 2006; 2014).³⁶ These scholars propose that web applications are changing the link between home and place, such that online discursive spaces override

³⁶ I understand Morely’s own argument about geography as somewhat more nuanced than how others have applied his concepts to diaspora national belonging and internet use. The latter verges on what I have referred to as the “homeland in homepages” thesis (Alinejad, 2013: 97).

or replace physical distances and places. They also direct their focus to the function of web usage for forming diaspora home through connections with a distant homeland.

In this chapter's ethnographic investigation of meanings of diaspora home and web usage, I am interested in whether the role of physical distances and places changes to become more "virtual" for people like Arashas they make use of web-based applications. How do they understand home from within spread-out and web-mediated networks of social contacts and imagined "homelands" passed down to them? But equally, how do they understand home from the context of the ordinary places they live in and the various web applications in their day to day lives? I treat the issue of home for these young people as one of multiple facets through which they negotiate Iranian American "belonging" as conceptualized in the book's Introduction (the other facets being dealt with in the other chapters of this book).

Rather than conceptualizing diaspora home in a given territory to which a label of national identity is assigned (as in commonplace uses of the term "homeland"), I treat diaspora home as a feeling that is sensed – a sensation of being at home and not only a claim to a place of home (see Brah, 1996: 197). The feeling of home is thus an embodied experience situated in place. This makes embodiment and being in place integral to understanding home (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Gorman Murray & Dowling, 2007). This approach expands the concept beyond home as a primarily cognitive state (see Rapport & Dawson, 1998). I understand people's ways of being in place as practices that are constitutive of home. And I focus on my respondents' practices of web usage as part of their ways of being at home in various places.

I present three types of practices of being at home(s) as central to the lives of my respondents. In each of the three sections of this chapter, I discuss each of these three sets of practices, highlighting the types of web usage that occurred in each. The first set of practices concerns life in family houses and the turning point of moving out. The second concerns young people's engagement with the city of LA and locations within it. And the third concerns return travel to destinations in Iran. The parental house, the city of LA, and return destinations in Iran are three sets of places that are particularly important to how

my respondents develop senses of being at home, and therefore construct Iranian American diaspora homes with the help of web applications.

I draw on scholars of Iranian diaspora who have pointed out that places are what people make of them, highlighting the agency of migrants in finding and creating new conditions of home (Ghorashi, 2002; see also Sullivan, 2001).³⁷ I add to this that diaspora home in this case is not only formed through what people make of place. As I show in the chapter, home is also shaped by what particular places offer to those in them. I also elaborate on existing notions of Iranian American diaspora home by showing how web usage fosters certain ways of being in, moving between, and developing relationships to certain places of home. I argue that formations of home depend on a combination of the places in question and the applications being used.

Reclaiming the city

Tehrangelles

An artist and vocalist in her 30s, Asa is flamboyant and sociable. I met her in 2009 at her Venice studio apartment, which was adorned with the photographic and print pieces she has made over the years. Her walls were filled with shelves of LP records, and racks full of colourful clothing. Asa put a Hayideh track³⁸ on the record player before reclining on one of

³⁷ Ghorashi demonstrates this in the case of Iranian women in the diaspora, including in LA. She states that home is “not related to the soil, but rather to what a place can offer and how one can become part of a life in a certain place” (2002: 20). This understanding of migrant home explains how static and exclusive relationships to a single and given national home(land) of Iran can lose currency for migrants, while the adaptive relationships they build with a new place after migration can make the latter into a diaspora home. While this is also relevant to a case like Arash’s illustrated here, it nevertheless leaves open for investigation the question of how a certain (relatively new) place becomes taken for granted as a home.

³⁸ Hayideh is an iconic Iranian vocal artist whose career began in the 60s in Iran. Her exile after the revolution took her to the UK and then the US. She lived in Los Angeles until her death in 1990. In 2009, the first documentary film about Hayideh’s life was released and screened at the Noor Film Festival in West LA and was received with much enthusiasm, being nominated for best documentary. The response to the film was noteworthy, with the line for the screenings extended out the front door and down along the side walk down

the sofas. She described Hayideh's music as having been an inspiration for in her own life and work. We sipped tea while Asa talked about the music projects she was working on at the time, and she gave me a copy of the CD she had recently recorded. It was a foretelling gift because since then Asa's music career was thrust forward by her participation in a successful cable television reality show called *Shahs of Sunset*, which has entered its second season.

Shahs is a show about the lives of a group of Iranian American individuals in their 30s living in LA. It was originally modeled on a popular (in the sense of being both widespread and low brow) reality show called *Jersey Shore*, created by the same producer and aired on the same channel. *Shahs* showcases the lifestyle of wealth and extravagance enjoyed by its main characters. In doing so, it draws on stereotypes about Iranians in LA as rich and their children as spoiled. Asa's position (as an artist) among the other characters in the show was characterized by some commentators and respondents as defined by her "bohemian" and "free spirited" personality in the group, and as one of my respondents commented on her blog, she was the one best at "being herself." Being an artist additionally sets her apart from the rest of the five main characters, who are mostly professionals involved with real estate or are otherwise entrepreneurs and/or are beneficiaries of their parents' fortunes. This shift into a public figure has changed Asa's internet practices.

the street. Hayideh remains key figure in Iranian music, for those in LA and beyond. Her songs continue to be reproduced by various artists and is thought of by many as one of the legendary Iranian divas.

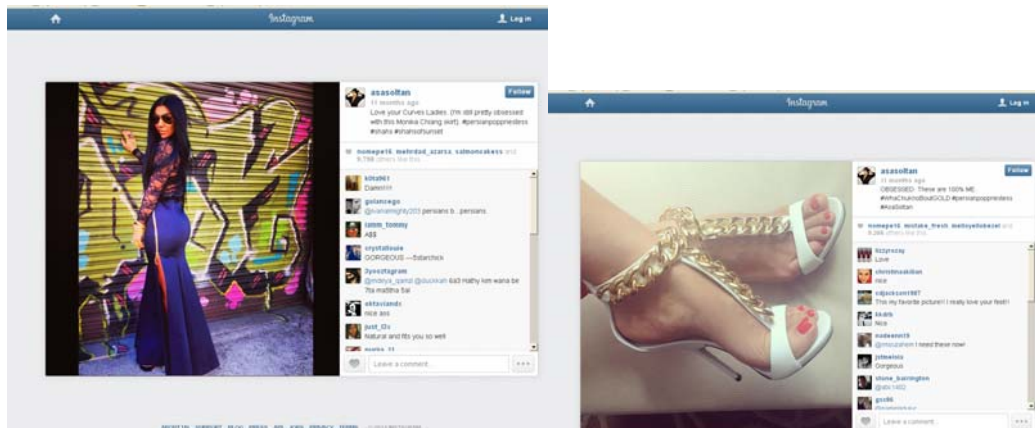


Figure 1 Screenshots from Asa's Instagram page from April 2013

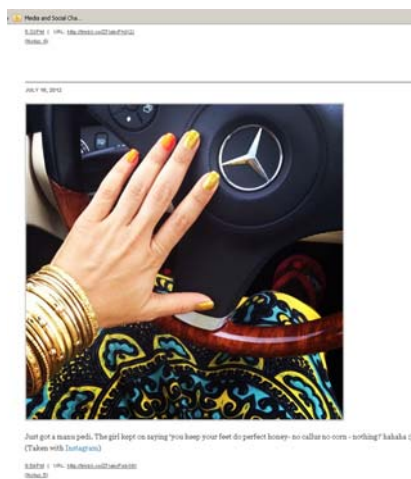


Figure 2 Asa's Tumblr, wild and untamed/trave[l]ing through magical galaxies, screenshots from July 2012

In 2009, before she had generated any of this public attention, Asa's personal website exhibited photos of herself and her work. It was a site she said a friend created for her years ago because it seemed like a good way to gain audiences for her art. However, she said she rarely updated or maintained the site because of technical barriers (not being able to readily add/change content) and she said that her artistic work meant that she was not inclined to physically sit behind a computer for most of the day. And so, she basically lost track of the site. Since the success of *Shahs*, however, Asa's internet usage has diversified and intensified. In a few years, her internet usage went from a few music videos on YouTube and single website she was not able to update herself, to the frequent, mobile, and

instantaneous updating of social media. Also, access to mobile internet apparently now also allowed Asa to overcome the issue she had mentioned earlier, i.e. being someone whose profession does not requires them to sit behind a computer for most of the day. Her social media postings are now a mixture of publicity for her projects, gratitude to fans/followers, and general image crafting. Posts that are oriented towards selling products are in the same sociable tone as ones that, for instance, repost the photo collages fans have made for and sent to her or impart advice to her fans. Her social media usage has become seamlessly incorporated into her life since her introduction into the LA television and music industry.

Tehrangelles is the most popular of the songs Asa has released. It is available on iTunes and the video, posted on YouTube, is set and shot in Venice Beach, a short bike ride away from her apartment. Venice Beach was an important location to Asa. Walking to the beach with her from her apartment, we stopped by a nearby Mexican taco stand to pick up some food. As we waited in line to order the ceviche that Asa recommended, she told me how she felt at home in Venice Beach because she loved to be near the water. She mentioned having lived on the Island of Khark, located off the Iranian coast in the Persian Gulf, and how she had grown attached to the beach from a young age. She said she wondered why living in West LA was typically seen as more Iranian than living where she lived, in Venice, away from the city and near the water. As we waited for our food, she added, “what’s not Iranian about picking up Mexican food on your way to the beach?” Her taste for Mexican food also appears via her casual photo posts of fruit sprinkled with salt, chili, and fresh lime juice, a snack that Mexican American pushcart vendors are known for selling, and which more of my respondents have posted photos of via social media; a typical LA snack.

Asa’s Tumblr³⁹ is called *wild and untamed/travel[l]ing through magical galaxies*.⁴⁰ On it she regularly posts captioned photographs uploaded from Instagram,⁴¹ which are also often cross-posted on Facebook and Twitter. These chronicle an ongoing series of everyday

³⁹ Tumblr is a blogging platform oriented towards less textual and more visual content.

⁴⁰ <http://asasoltanrahmati.tumblr.com/>

⁴¹ Instagram is social networking application for sharing photos taken with a mobile phone camera.

activities with friends or alone, her music performances, earlier photos from her youth, mainly of herself and some friends. The content is relatively uniform across the different platforms used, is updated daily, and reaches an audience of `friends`, `followers`, and fans in the thousands. Asa's detractors also use social media applications, and material insulting or ridiculing Asa, including her public appearances, for instance, a fight she got into on a particular episode of the show, circulate as well. Asa repeatedly refers to such responses in aggregate as the work of "haters" in her postings, and advocates ignoring such reactions, an experience and a reaction that paralleled her earlier encounters with negative comments in her YouTube music videos years ago.

Asa's use of social media reminded me of how, in 2009, she had described seeing herself as being her own artwork. The way she dressed, lived, what she did, the things she surrounded herself with, were all included as her art. Through it, she expressed her particular way of being Iranian American. This is why it seemed thoroughly fitting to me that her sharply growing use of internet media – which coincided with the beginning of her television career -- was oriented towards visually sharing precisely these things with others via social media platforms. That is, she used a string of social media applications to share the product of her creative work: herself. And Asa's eccentricity in her art, music, and public persona was inseparable from and constitutive of her Iranian Americann-ness.

There were two things Asa's statements conveyed to me. Firstly, she seemed to explicitly yet effortlessly push any taken-for-granted boundaries of Iranian-ness. Like some of my other respondents, her creative expressions thrived on the fact that she saw herself as part of a generation of young people with specific but diverse interests, experiences, and tastes. Asa and others I spoke with expressed certainty about these particularities being able to be integrated with creative ways of being Iranian American, and also that these could find audiences via internet. Asa's particular way of doing this was public, colorful, daring, pop cultural, and styled in such a way as to appeal to a broad, young audience. For Asa, this audience was found through a combination of reality show, music, and social media

promotion. Through these channels, being Iranian American for Asa was negotiated in the creative work of being herself.

The second thing this conveyed to me was that her unconventional definitions of Iranian American-ness were also shaped by the city. Asa's relationship to the city of LA -- where she has been living and growing up since her teen years -- was especially evident the *Tehrangelles* music video. The Persian lyrics of *Tehrangelles* describe practices of driving through Westwood in a BMW and visiting particular establishments like *Attari* sandwich shop and consuming particular foods (*chelow kabab ba doogh*, or kabab, rice, and traditional carbonated yoghurt drink). The lyrics about West LA are juxtaposed to the setting of the recognizable Venice Boulevard, which is anything but a known Iranian neighbourhood but no less an iconic location, easily visually associated with Los Angeles and California. Hence, Asa plays on conventional places and practices of LA Iranian-ness while combining them with much less conventional ways of being Iranian American in the city.

Asa's explicit engagement with the places of the city of LA in this song wraps the reference to Iranian Westwood in a fun and visually flamboyant package. It is explicitly Iranian and Angelino, and offers a mixture of recognizable urban locations of the city for both Iranian Americans and other Angelinos. And the combination of typical and atypical places associated with Iranian Americans in LA that are represented in the video references established notions of Iranian-ness as located and practiced in Westwood, while also expanding it to a non-typical site like Venice beach. Furthermore, the city as a whole becomes a reference point in this video. This is evident in Asa's deployment of the "Tehrangelles" logo emblazoned on the tank top she wears in the video. The text is written in the familiar font of the logo of the city's baseball team, the LA Dodgers, which adorns Dodgers Stadium in Elysian Heights, as well as the team's uniforms and much of the merchandise, a sports symbol which arguably has contributed to the broader branding of the city of LA. On her Facebook profile, Asa can be seen in photographs wearing other pieces of clothing decorated with the same logo, and other users are invited to purchase

pieces in the clothing line. Appropriating this recognizable and symbolic typographic style makes reference to symbols of the city of LA with an Iranian American spin that is flashy and youth-/pop culturally-oriented, consistent with the rest of her music and persona.

I see Asa doing two important things with her pop cultural productions. First, she is extending conventions of Iranian American-ness in a way that is particularly appealing to a younger generation. The places that are remnants of an older generation are referenced, but these are supplemented with Asa's references to alternative sites of being Iranian in LA. By referencing both the old and new places in the city associated with practices of being Iranian American, and by styling herself with the help of youth cultural reference points, Asa performs Iranian American-ness through her practices of being at home in LA.

Second, she uses social media to stage this everyday performance for her audience of fans and followers, as her celebrity social media practices become incorporated seamlessly into her ways of being Iranian American in LA. Asa's practices show how she makes her home in LA. She uses social media to publicize her eccentric way of being Iranian American, and through the sociality of fans-to-celebrities between herself and her followers. This is typical of and made possible by social media interactions. In what follows I describe how some of my other respondents shape Iranian American-ness by using web applications in their practices of being at home in LA.

Food Places

In 2010, the "Living" rubric of the Los Angeles Times covered a local "Persian Pizza" restaurant called "Café Glacé."⁴² with a positive review about the recently-opened establishment in Westwood.

⁴² Beeta and Aryana were interested in this coverage and the establishment itself. For a number of my respondents, reviews and personal suggestions for places to eat were a part of a more general interest in the

[T]his is an honest-to-God, full-blooded, American-style pizza, with bell peppers and melted cheese and everything. But this is also pizza freed of any obligations of authenticity. It's not authentically New York, nor authentically Neapolitan, nor is it trying to be. It's made by Iranians for Iranians, guided by a distinctive, charmingly un-Italian aesthetic.

The restaurant became well-known among a number of my respondents. While visiting it in 2012, it seemed to me that part of its attraction was its difference from the full-service restaurants across the street where an order of *chelo kabob* or other traditional Iranian dishes would be common. Here, the food served in plastic baskets, the condiments on the tables, and the customers paying at the register provided a more casual air, one that might appeal more to nearby UCLA students on an average evening than the more formal neighboring alternatives. According to the review, the only origin attributed to this food was fast food from “the streets of Tehran” – a dish that some of my respondents knew about from their own and others’ recent visits to Tehran. It was not only the use of modern Tehran as inspiration that made it special within its Westwood surroundings, but (perhaps even more so) the restaurant’s innovation within the LA landscape for Iranian food.

In 2013, I went to Café Glace with Sepideh, a young woman, married and in her 20s. She worked in web publishing before going to graduate school, and started to work as a mental health professional in an organization that is especially set up to offer services to Iranian American clientele. Before making this career shift, Sepideh used to write for a variety of websites and blogs, including food blogs. Her interest in food journalism meant that she followed a number of food blogs, mainly through browsing RSS feeds she collected in Google Reader. She also considered herself something of an aficionado when it came to Iranian food places in the city, giving tips to newcomers, exploring new food places with friend, and following food journalism that covers “Persian food.”

food culture of the cities they live in and visit. And talk about a certain “Persian food place” was sometimes interchangeable with a recommendation for a “pasta place” or “Mexican place.”

In a group email exchange from October 2009, Sepideh drew the attention of friends to a recent review in the digital publication of LA Weekly magazine.⁴³ The piece highlighted the “underrated” status of Westwood for cuisine, but did so by arguing that the area had *other* things to offer than “Persian food.” In her slight annoyance with the article, Sepideh stated the following at one point in the private email exchange about the piece:

I think what really bugs me about it is that we’ve got ONE STREET in LA that has all our food on it and they won’t even let us have that without comment (plus the other stuff on that street kinda sucks compared to the persianity...).

Having made this statement, Sepideh then referred to a piece about food in Westwood that she had written earlier - it was posted in a different digital publication. Her reaction was based in a passion for and interest in LA Iranian “food places,” but also an emotional one that I thought reflected a collective stake in the protection of this part of the city as Iranian American (“we’ve got ONE street”). Her comment also makes a claim to the Iranian-ness, or “persianity,” of Westwood Boulevard in the face of coverage that downplays this element of this neighborhood’s food culture.

In a city where the practice of “eating out” is a rather regular affair, the status of Iranian American-ness within LA’s often ethnically demarcated food categories was important for several of my respondents. In fact, keeping one’s mental map of good (Persian) food in the city up to date was almost a responsibility, and among friends who spent time and effort talking and writing about Iranian American-ness with regard to food in LA, staying up to date with emerging food places was part of being Iranian American in LA. Sepideh’s practices of frequenting Westwood Boulevard restaurants, familiarizing herself with new ones, and engaging with the media coverage of these places reflect an involved protectiveness of the Iranian-ness of the food culture of this spatial location in LA.

⁴³ Galuten, Noah, “Underrated Neighborhood: Westwood Boulevard, Not Just For Tehrangelenos” http://blogs.laweekly.com/squidink/2009/10/underrated_neighborhood_westwo.php (accessed 29/11/14)

This occurs within a broader context where a passion for food, and a drive to follow columns and blogs on the topic and cultivate a hobby of food specialism, is part of an increasingly fashionable way to know one's city. And being a "foodie," as some of my respondents call themselves, is a contemporary trend in urban culture. With popular websites like Yelp.com – used regularly by a number of my respondents -- that are dominated by local food commentary by customers, it is increasingly common to develop one's general mental food map of the city with the help of web applications (and mobile devices)⁴⁴ when moving through the city.⁴⁵ The passions of members of the second generation like Sepideh fit into this young and fashionable way to know LA. This broader context also gives a particularly current, urban aesthetic to how they practice their Iranian American-ness.⁴⁶

The restaurant, Café Glace mentioned above attracted attention among my respondents when it first appeared because of its newness. The creative take on Iranian food seemed to add to the appeal. Another innovative food place that some respondents circulated coverage of was the Pizza restaurant, *PizzaNista*, in particular with regard to its 2012 special event, when its second-generation Iranian American owner served a Pizza with

⁴⁴ As some scholars have claimed (S. Graham & Marvin, 2002; A. M. Townsend, 2000), the urban structure of contemporary cities owes much to the technological development of the telephone and telecommunications technologies. Townsend also elaborates on how the "technologically constructed nature of space and time" suggests that mobile communications technologies are changing urban life (Townsend, 2000: 98). Although it is beyond the scope of this research, this raises questions about the role of digital devices with internet connectivity in the development of contemporary cities. In doing this my research suggests it is important to include in the analysis the role of specific software applications that are oriented towards interactions between people and places such as social media sites that have locational properties.

⁴⁵ Mobile technologies as used while people move through the city and find information about places as they did so were increasingly becoming an important part of how some of my respondents' inhabited the city. Not all of my respondents had a smart phone at this time, so some who have since acquired one might already be taking up new practices. For future studies that focus on this, Pink and Hjorth's fascinating work on doing embodied ethnography of mobile technologies is relevant for its approach to understanding the social implications of the materiality of mobile devices such as camera phones (see Pink & Hjorth, 2012)

⁴⁶ In a parallel way, taking photos of food and posting them to social media platforms is a popular practice more generally. For some of my respondents this meant posting photos of Iranian food to Instagram and/or Facebook (Arash and Asa were among those who did this) while including the Persian names of the foods in the postings. This was another example of how a currently popular style of engaging with food with the use of social media was deployed within a particular style of being Iranian American for my second-generation respondents.

“traditional” Iranian “*kabob koobideh*” on it for a limited time at the Downtown LA restaurant. Arash posted a YouTube video about this event on Facebook. The second-generation restaurant owner, Salmah Aghah, was seen in the video, speaking about how the special-recipe Persian Pizza was made and explaining that the “originality” of this Pizza was due to the two Iranian American men involved in the project “doing it our way -- it’s different -- and putting our own signature on it.” What struck me about these instances was how these food places innovated by using elements of “Persian” or “traditional” Iranian food while also explicitly subverting the boundaries of what Iranian food is typically like in LA by negating conventions. The food landscape of Iranian LA is changing with the developing tastes of (a new generation of) local Iranian Americans and the need for innovation among the existing abundance of “Persian food” places.

This innovation does not always imply a break with the older generation’s food-consumption practices in the city. The latter is perhaps nowhere more evident than in a particular kind of food place that plays a part in the lives of so many children of Iranian immigrants growing up in LA: the “Persian Supermarket.” Firouzeh Dumas wrote a descriptive piece titled *The Real Supermarkets of Orange County*,⁴⁷ for the New York Times about a widely-known Persian Market in Orange County. Duma’s NYT piece is a personal and humorous portrait of her experience shopping at a “Persian supermarket” in Orange County with three generations of her own family (including her parents and her small children) -- primarily the act of standing in a long line to wait for *Sangak* bread. The general practice of shopping at the “Persian supermarket” is uniformly recognizable across Iranians in LA. For the second generation, first associations with “Persian supermarkets” are with memories of accompanying parents to do periodical shopping for products that could not be found in other stores, sometimes driving across long distances of (inter-)city sprawl to visit the most well-stocked or high quality store.

⁴⁷Dumas, Firouzeh, “The Real Supermarkets of Orange County,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/magazine/21lives-t.html> (accessed, 29/11/14)

The Persian supermarket is also among the food places that make an appearance in Tara Bahrampour's 2010 piece, *Persia on the Pacific*, for New Yorker magazine,⁴⁸ which include such references as "a kabob restaurant in the Valley" and "the Iranian market in Thousand Oaks." Bahrampour's piece is written both autobiographically and also around the protagonist and acquaintance, "Jonathan" (the character's "Iranian name" is Parshaw), a second generation young man living in the Westlake Village neighbourhood near Thousand Oaks, about an hour drive west of Downtown LA. Some of my respondents shared this piece via Facebook and are friends with the protagonist who features in it. Bahrampour quotes her central character:

"In Iran they taste so much better." Parshaw is used to hearing this from older Iranians, for whom food has become the touchstone for more intangible longings. "They talk about it all the time," he says. "The lamb and the meat—how it was different because the lamb had all the fat on the tail."

The picture Bahrampour paints here regarding food, and with her piece as a whole, is about what she describes as an "inherited nostalgia"⁴⁹ on the part of the second generation. As evident in this example, many of the second generation do not have memory of the tastes of food from Iran, they are familiar with the descriptions of others, such as their parents and other "older Iranians" about the remembered tastes.⁵⁰ Attachments to the Persian supermarket by younger generations, as discussed in the pieces of Dumas and Bahrampour, represent an inheritance of Iranian American-ness by the second generation through family practices that center around these important food places in the city. Their representations of food places in LA not only tell stories about food, but also tell stories about experiences of migration and the life of the second generation as they unfold within

⁴⁸ Bahrampour, Tara, "Persia on the Pacific," http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2003/11/10/031110fa_fact (accessed 28/11/14)

⁴⁹ This concept was first elaborated in academic work on the second generation of Iranian Americans by Neda Maghbouleh (Maghbouleh, 2010b)

⁵⁰ This is something that changes when for those who partake in return visits to parts of Iran, as I discuss in the third and final section of this chapter.

the city today. I noticed their pieces being referenced and circulated via social media among my respondents, even years after their publication.

In part, being at home in the city involves knowing, visiting, reviewing, and protecting Iranian food places in the city through practices of both moving within and representing the city through web applications. This takes on particular current, urban styles that are particular to the ways the younger generation of Iranian Americans inhabit the city. These practices are situated within friendships with Iranian American peers and the use of certain web applications (like review sites, blogs, web magazines, and private email) helps mediate the localized yet cosmopolitan sociality of being a foodie in the city. In addition, websites of reputable American publications like the New York Times and New Yorker offer a context where second-generation (women) writers are in a position to tell the Magazine stories that showcase some of the long-established Iranian food places of LA in widely-read, English language publications.⁵¹ Hence, my respondents' use of this range of web applications takes place within a context of a contemporary, specialist, urban, literary style of inhabiting LA that draws on both emergent and established places for being Iranian American within the city. In the following, I move on to describe some of my respondents' engagement with the well-known phenomenon of "Persian Palaces" in the city of LA.

Persian Palaces

On UglyPersianHouses.com,⁵² web visitors are greeted with its basic blog format and the large, yellow title at the top of the homepage, "Ugly Persian Houses" with the tagline underneath it, "Ruining the neighborhood... one house at a time," together with a photograph of one of the houses in question. The neighbourhoods covered included Beverly Hills and Brentwood, but also Camarillo in Ventura County, Century City, Encino,

⁵¹ Although it is noteworthy that both these publications are New York-based, rather than locally-based in LA, where the authors are from and write about. This has some linkage to my discussion in the final chapter regarding the exclusion perceived by some, of the voices of LA Iranians from news coverage, in particular in the LA Times.

⁵² The URL of the site www.uglypersianhouses.com (accessed March 2011) has since become inactive.

and Hollywood. On its “About” page, the blog’s creators have included the following description of their motives, followed by a call to visitors to take photos of “ugly Persian houses” in their neighborhoods and send them in to be posted on the site.⁵³

In the late 1970s, millions of Iranians, fleeing a tyrannical government, emigrated to the United States. They brought with them hopes, dreams and a fondness for truly hideous architecture. Go into any neighborhood and you recognize the telltale signs — and no house, whether it be sweet bungalow or Spanish is safe from their notions of style. Pillars, ornate rod iron gates, oval windows...they spare no expense in taking some of the loveliest homes and turning them into some kind of architectural freakshow. And all this begs the question — if you love America, why turn all of your houses into reminders of the very place you fled?

In 2010 Sepideh used her blog ParsArts.com links to Ugly Persian Houses with the following post:

You know what’s tackier than an ugly Persian house? Using architectural critique as a cover for xenophobia and racism! This site’s writers insist they’re not racist but in the same post drop the term “Ugly Persian Creep” (replace “Persian” with “black” or “Jewish” – does it still sound not-racist?). On their about page, they ask “if you love America, why turn all of your houses into reminders of the very place you fled?” (Not even gonna break down why that’s so messed up but suffice it to say there’s nothing remotely Irooni [Iranian] about this style of architecture whatsoever, so why peg all of Persianness with this hideousness?) Yikes, dudes. Just... yikes.⁵⁴

The hubbub in LA around the Persian Palace phenomenon has played out in media coverage from local and style magazines like *LA Weekly*, *Curbed* and *W Magazine* and the LA

⁵³ While the site was anonymously created, one second-generation observer of the site informed me it was set up by real estate professionals in LA.

⁵⁴ Saremi, Sepideh, “Ugly Persian Houses,” <http://www.parsarts.com/> (accessed 1/12/14).

Times,⁵⁵ to broadcast news of NBC, the phenomenon of “Persian Palaces” is one that brings issues of style, taste, culture, and money together with houses, homes and neighbourhoods, pushing them all to the forefront of a public debate about Iranian Americans and the city of LA. In virtually every instance where the “Persian Palace” phenomenon is covered, so is “the king of the Persian Palace,” Hamid Omrani. Hundreds of his constructions are deemed “Persian Palaces,” (an often pejoratively used term) built as residences and in a typical style which has come to dominate in some Beverly Hills streets, as well as spread to other wealthy neighbourhoods on the West side of the city.

A first-generation immigrant in his 50s, Omrani is described in the press as a “Persian Jew” who came to Beverly Hills in the 70s and is part of a larger flow of Jewish Iranians who came to LA, making Beverly Hills a center for Iranian Americans of Jewish background in the minds of so many Los Angelinos, Iranian and non-Iranian alike. Today, high-profile second-generation nightclub magnate, Sam Nazarian, and his uncle are among the “Persian Jews” who have enjoyed attention for the extravagant homes Omrani has designed for them. This has been established as something of a standard narrative about these types of houses, what kinds of people live in them, and how they came to be a part of LA.

However, it is noteworthy that, on the whole, the debate repeatedly points to the decline of this style of houses, specifically as a result of the rise of the younger generation born and raised in the US. This strikes an interesting general tension within the second generation between publicly defending these houses against ethnic-based exclusion while at the same time not preferring this style of the houses themselves. Hassan, a friend who has worked for many years in municipal planning in LA,⁵⁶ makes a connection between the dissipation of the “Persian Palace” style of construction and the rise of the second generation’s different tastes in the following.

⁵⁵ The LA Times also published a letter written in response to one of the articles covering the phenomenon of LA’s “Persian Palaces” written by the Mo Borghei, President of the Society of Iranian Architects and Planners, condemning the houses in question as not representing “any element of Persian architecture” and supporting “the city of Beverly Hills for putting a stop to these unprofessional architectural practices.” Borghei, Mo, “Insulted by Beverly Hills’ ‘Persian Palaces,’” <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/jul/11/magazine/tm-letters28.2> (accessed 29/11/14)

⁵⁶ Hassan is currently working for the City of Glendale as a Director of Community Development

Iranian immigrant and 1st and 2nd generation Iranian American architects and designers are very active and quite influential in all types of construction from single family homes to 70-story high rises. So, the identifiable ethnic aesthetic preferences become much more subtle, but still identifiable by trained eyes. In a nut shell, I think the initial group of Iranian immigrants, much like their European counterparts in earlier decades or centuries, brought with them their interpretation of what constitutes status and symbolizes "high taste" and luxury and tried to combine it all at once in their residences. In my experience, the generation that was born in those homes is quite rapidly stepping away from those symbols and is instead incorporating some of the visual elements they were raised with into an aesthetic environment that is much more accessible to their non-Iranian-American friends and counterparts.

A similar trend is noted in the following excerpt from a *W Magazine* piece about the "Persian Palace" phenomenon in LA from July 2009 called *The Persian Conquest*, by Kevin West. It mentions the possibility of the younger generation reducing the proliferation of this style of housing through their tastes and preferences.

Several Persian developers and realtors in Beverly Hills suggest that the stereotypical Persian Palace may be going out of style among the city's younger, more assimilated generation of Iranians. "My younger clients say, 'I don't want something that screams, 'I am Persian,'" says designer Dardashti.

Of interest is how the Iranian-ness or Persian-ness of the houses is being dealt with in the public debate. While these statements suggest that the second generation is distancing themselves from what has been defined as Iranian in LA and, thus, making themselves more accessible to American peers. However, to my second-generation respondents, it is neither a desire to be seen as more American, nor a desire to be seen as less Iranian that

motivates them to reject these houses. Rather, they acknowledge the connection between this style of houses and Iranian Americans⁵⁷ but site their personal style preferences.

For instance, Sepideh sees this as a typical preference of some LA Iranians who have houses that are flashy on the outside and contain gaudy furniture and decorations inside. And Shiva says she associates the recognizable design with a particular type of Iranians' houses both inside Iran and the US -- A taste for ostentation, according to her, comes with a culture of status that many in Iran participate in by accruing symbols of wealth. However, both these young women describe this style of house as not fitting with their personal tastes – particularly with regard to any house they would live in, themselves -- and reject the notion that there is something necessarily Iranian about what have come to be known as Persian Palaces.

This position overlaps with the response posted by Iranian American architects to the critical piece from 2004, published in the LA Times. That position also took distance from these constructions in LA. However, it did so mainly on grounds that their building was unprofessional and did not represent the range of styles and projects used in by all Iranian American home owners and architects. The architects questioned professional rigors and the broader skills of Iranians in their business. Indeed, Shiva and Sepideh were similarly concerned with broadening associations with Iranian-ness in LA beyond these houses in the public debate. However, for these young women, the personal tastes they express reflect both a generational and a class difference from the kind of Iranian American-ness they associate with these houses, based on the common narratives about their owners.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ I did not speak to anyone who was “born in those homes,” Hassan suggests. Of course, many of the first generation were not part of the elite who brought copious enough amounts of capital with them from Iran and/or worked their way into one of these houses over their time in the US, so their children would and could not be born and raised in such houses. Although it is undoubted that part of the second generation of Iranian Americans in LA were indeed born and raised in such houses, these were not people I had more substantive contact with.

⁵⁸ To a lesser extent a religious difference is also evident in the fact that these women are not Jewish, while the common image of these houses is that they are owned by Jewish Iranian Americans. While the associations with royalists and “new money” Iranians in LA are also strong, the names of certain high profile, self-identified Jewish Iranian Americans are publicly associated with these types of houses. This certainly is not to say that these houses are typical of Jewish Iranian American lifestyles in LA as a whole.

Their own lives and those of most people around them are far removed from the lifestyles that these houses are commonly associated with in LA. Most of my respondents lived in apartments, university housing, or bungalows, and mostly rental housing, which, while no doubt comfortable and in line with their middle-class backgrounds, were certainly no Palaces, Persian or otherwise. Sepideh joked about the incidental use of white marble stone and gold-colored taps and fixtures in the bathroom of her otherwise modest, one two bedroom rental house as typically “Persian.” Shiva lived in a shared rental apartment, but also joked on one occasion that her guest bathroom was so elaborately decorated because Iranians especially put their best foot forward for guests. I took these comments to reflect these young women’s experience of growing up in LA – with an acute awareness of the visibly wealthy and sometimes caricatured Iranians in the city, but also with the experience of recognizing parts of those characteristics as typifying Iranian-ness. Theirs seemed to be a distanced recognition, one which could perhaps best be expressed through humor/irony. The latter is done in more intimate spaces, clearly separated from spaces where the more serious tensions around the ethnicization of these houses is discussed, and mainly takes place exclusively among the second generation themselves.

Much of the framing of Persian Palaces by journalists and commentators expressed concerns over an architectural “heritage” of an LA with charm and whimsy against a “foreign,” brashly modernizing influence some saw as with the deterioration of neighbourhoods linked with a rise in Iranian immigration.⁵⁹ “Persian Palaces” are thought not to fit in with the Spanish colonial style housing that is an early 20th century revival of the architectural styles first introduced by the Spanish colonizers of the North American continent in the 15th century. What Kropp and others (see Kropp, 2001) call the “Spanish fantasy past” created for Los Angelinos since the 1930s, was an oversimplified life of the past, untouched by modernity and a romanticization that the author argues led in the following decades to “restoring crumbling missions and building red-tile roofed homes”

⁵⁹ See Alexander, Karenm , “The Big-Box Battle of Beverly Hills,” <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/jun/13/magazine/tm-bevhills24/4> (accessed, 28/11/14)

(2001: 36).⁶⁰ This concern apparently carried weight among city authorities as an ordinance was passed to restrict the construction of these houses, but only by prohibiting a combination of characteristics and style traits being deployed in a single construction.

There is pressure for the city not to be changed in this way. And press and broadcast media representations of LA and its Iranian American presence contribute to making these houses a source of a local contention between the preservation of LA's image and immigrants shaping the city with their presence. In doing so, they form themselves through claiming an ethnically demarcated status of Iranian Americans in the city that is continuous with that of older Iranians. But they also reject a style that is situated at the intersection of generation and class, which they see as representing a way of being Iranian American that is not their own.

Here I have described my respondents' ways of being at home in the city as reflecting a lifestyle that is rather distinct from the stereotypical and controversial images of LA Iranian-ness. This is due to the limits of my respondents' financial situations, but it is also due to the more general divergence of second-generation preferences from the styles associated with parts of the first generation. Nevertheless, home is also claimed in the city through defense against ethnically-marked (mis)representations of neighborhoods associated with Iranian wealth in LA. The particular website in question, coupled with personal blog and other social media responses, creates possibilities for mediated contestations and collective self-representation, even if among audiences of peers and direct social contacts. In what follows I link together the three instances of being at home in the city I have discussed in this section.

⁶⁰ "Missions" refers to the Spanish religious and military outposts set up in California during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Inhabiting the city as second-generation Iranian Americans

My respondents engage with places in particular ways as part of their practices of being at home in LA as Iranian Americans. In so doing, they construct diaspora home(s). I have tried to show how this happens by using examples of my respondents' practices of inhabiting LA. I have shown how their use of web applications as part of these practices of inhabiting the city. They are taken up to create and contest representations of the city from their own vantage point, and to map reference points into their social maps of LA. They do this with attention for established places associated with being LA Iranian, but also with an eye for emergent styles and habits that fit into new ways of living in the city more generally.

LA enables them to be Iranian American in very particular ways. That is, the city is not simply the backdrop against which these young people live their lives, but acts upon their ways of doing so, particularly by offering them styles of inhabitation they can choose from. The city they live in is therefore an important part of how their Iranian American selves are formed, and LA Iranian-ness is analogous with Sreberny's use of the category "Iranian living in London," which highlights the specificities of urban location (Annabelle Sreberny, 2005). Even as my respondents diversify and expand which places constitute "Tehrangeles," the city offers them particular modes of being Iranian American that are specific to LA, with its intimacy with celebrity lifestyles, its extremely diverse ethnic food culture(s), and its ambiguous relationship with material affluence.

Open claims by Iranians to LA as a place of home are relatively recent, and such claims have historically been difficult. Naficy describes LA Iranians in decades past as not living in "a single ethnic enclave that can provide a measure of ethnic safety for insiders. Instead they live in small pockets, usually in prosperous neighbourhoods across Southern California," (Naficy, 1993). This dispersion throughout the city characterizes Iranian American current patterns of residence as well. Nevertheless, those "pockets" of residence seem to be growing, and commercial concentration has also become a source of public identification.

In 2010 the City of Los Angeles officially recognized a commercial quarter of Westwood Boulevard as “Persian Square”⁶¹ – it is sometimes also referred to in the press as “Little Persia” -- and in 2012, Google Maps labeled the neighborhood around Westwood Boulevard as “Tehrangeles” on its maps. Given these examples, the model of the ethnic enclave seems to be the path to collective recognition in the city, even though, in the case of Iranians, one did not emerge through patterns of concentrated residence historically. The official incorporation of LA Iranians seems to be taking place along the same lines that gained so many of LA’s other ethnic minorities a degree of recognition.

While this can be seen as a localization of Iranian American-ness, it is not simply that. Some aspects of a chic, urban lifestyle have more in common with styles of living in other global cities where Iranian migration is concentrated than, for instance, with the first generation in LA. Some of my respondents who have spent time living in other major US metropolis on both East and West coasts, have ongoing connections to places like New York, the San Francisco Bay Area and the Iranian Americans living there. This is reflected both in their urban styles of living as much as in actual social networks. They engage in (second generation) collaborative projects, and set up and run organizations involving other young Iranian Americans (*B/ta’arof* (digital) magazine mentioned in the introduction to this chapter is just one example thereof). Therefore, localization also connects them to an inter-urban Iranian American-ness.

The combination of social media practices and certain urban styles also reflects how pop music, food consumption, and housing tastes cross-cut the ethnic identifications that come with claiming Iranian American quarters of LA. This supports an understanding of media and migration that sees media use as not being “determined ethnically but, rather, socially” (Madianou, 2011: 22). Likewise, web usage in the examples I discussed reflect how web-

⁶¹ Press Release from the office of council member Paul Koretz,, “Persian Square approved for Los Angeles, thanks to Paul Koretz motion”
http://cd5.lacity.org/stellent/groups/ElectedOfficials/@CD5_Contributor/documents/Contributor_Web_Content/LACITYP_012835.pdf (accessed, 28/11/14)

mediated spaces have been opened up for continued struggles, thus representing “an embattled space for becoming ‘at home’ in the world” (Shohat, 2011: 224).

However, it does not seem accurate to see this as a “cyberspace” that constitutes the “digital undermining of territoriality” through a simultaneous “virtual re-territorialization” (Shohat, 1998: 227). Scholars who highlight this dimension of digital media tend to focus more on the condition of exile when proposing arguments of “re-territorialization” (such as that by Naficy presented earlier in the Introduction and Shohat here). In such work, internet is viewed as a way to overcome exile displacement. In the absence of needing to overcome such a condition, my second-generation respondents do not appear to use internet for this purpose. And as internet technologies further differentiate with the proliferation of various Web.2.0 and social media applications, as well as mobile devices, they arguably become increasingly a part of everyday practices of inhabiting the city in the ways I have described, rather than being limited to being a window onto a distant homeland. Having discussed the role of the city as an influential place for being at home for my respondents, I now move on to discuss my respondents’ engagement with another kind of location that has significance in many of their lives as a place of home: their parents’ house.

Moving out to stay at home

Shiva’s trip

Shiva had accrued some savings over the four years she had spent working and living in her parents’ house after graduating from college. She talked about how her mother had encouraged her to “buy a home [house]” with the money, now that she was in her late 20s – one near her parents’ house in Orange County, where Shiva was born and raised. But Shiva was unenthusiastic about the idea. “I don’t want to buy a house in a place where I don’t feel at home,” she said. Despite having spent her upbringing in the area, as well as having spent

the past few years living there while working in Downtown LA, Shiva was determined to find an alternative place for herself. Her feelings about this place of her upbringing had changed over time.

Back in the day I loved Southern California. I felt there was a huge multicultural community. When I was growing up I felt it... Orange County was great. But now I have to mentally prepare myself when I go there.

Shiva described the over-full parking lots at the shopping centers during the day, her detachment from people who lived in the neighborhood, and her sense that Orange County was becoming more homogenous – in her eyes her neighbourhood used to be more ethnically diverse and less densely populated while she was growing up. For Shiva, this meant a deterioration in her relationship with those living in her Orange County neighborhood, including Iranian Americans. Although she returned there often to see her immediate family and stay at her parents' house – a place in which she still said she felt very much at home – she would not choose this area to live in more permanently. This was the home of her past, and as she had grown to the age of independence alongside neighborhood changes over time, it could not serve as the home of her future.

This feeling was what gave her the drive to use her savings to undertake a year-long road trip across the United States. "Instead of using the money to buy a home [house], I decided to use it to find one," she said. This meant a journey to find and settle into a house in a place that gave her the same feeling she once had about Orange County, and taking a trip like this fit with the curiosity and independence of Shiva's character. She explained her motivations in the following way.

A journey was necessary because I hear people's experiences, but I find that what I get out of a place is different. Researching places on the internet doesn't work for me either. I want to feel a sense of community where I live. That people are aware of each other and care about each other and that they somehow adopt a culture. They create a culture. I want to feel like people are friendly. In Southern California and a

lot of big cities, people don't make eye contact. Strangers don't. I noticed I was doing that too and I didn't like it. As though, if I smiled at people it would be too much emotion. I've found now that many other cities are not like that.

The search for an ideal house and place to live was combined with a need to "feel a sense of community" in a particular "place," something that could not be ascertained through a search via internet as only physical presence – however temporary -- could allow Shiva to discern whether a place gave her the right "feeling" of home. Shiva's web usage, however, was indeed important for the way she maintained communication with those she left behind in Southern California. And she started a blog with this purpose in mind.

I started my blog because mainly other people were asking me if I would start a blog. I thought that was their way of telling me they wanted to keep in touch with me. I felt like it would be like me keeping in touch with all my friends and colleagues who wanted to be involved in my experience. And the Twitter I did because my parents are not phone people. None of us enjoy talking on the phone. They didn't use text messaging before, but now they do. I could do Twitter updates much faster than blog updates. I wanted to make sure they wouldn't have any excuse to worry about me. They can subscribe so that they get it straight to their phone. My aunts and uncles did it too. And then some other people as well. They're scattered, but my family that's following me are all in Southern California.

Alongside her blog, Twitter was a way for Shiva to quickly update family in Southern California on a daily basis in ways that were more convenient and conducive to her existing family relationships than talking on the telephone. As she travelled across the country by car, Shiva used mobile internet communications on a daily basis in order to stay in touch with the people who care about her. More specifically, her phone allowed her to update her Twitter status on the move, and her parents, in turn, would receive notifications of her updates on their mobile phones. Her blog was also set up to post a link to Twitter and Facebook every time she posted a new entry. Her contact with her parents during this period allowed her use her mobile phone with roaming internet connectivity (for which

she had to get an affordable plan, to avoid extra out-of-state charges for this particular purpose) to reassure her parents about her safety every day, while allowing her not to feel bound by their concerns.

Despite the contact, Shiva described missing her family and Southern California at times during her period on the road, particularly mentioning her mother's home-cooked *Ghormeh Sabzi* or the Iranian food she had access to by virtue of living in Southern California where Iranian restaurants are abundant and serve what she considered high quality Iranian food compared to other places she had tried Iranian food. In some ways these changes are indistinguishable from the same processes in other American families (indeed) navigating the spatial dynamics of no longer "living at home." In this sense, the sociality of family life is similar for Shiva to what is typically the case for other young Americans moving out. Shiva engages with the place of her upbringing by through her mobile device and social media applications as she moves away, which allows her to combine her family relationships and obligations with her need for feeling at home at a physical distance from her family house and that neighbourhood.

At the same time, for Shiva as for other members of the second generation I spoke with, the move from the family house is connected with a shift in ways of being Iranian American. Especially in stories they recalled from their childhoods, my respondents associated being Iranian with family life, while American-ness, by contrast, was part of a world outside. Increased independence from the family house therefore signifies an important inter-generational turning point as young people's movement comes with navigating Iranian American-ness under new circumstances. This move also makes them aware of certain elements of their Iranian American-ness that their place of upbringing offered, but which they may not have been aware of before (e.g. being used to eating home-cooked Iranian food, or having always grown up around establishments that serve "good" Iranian food). I also heard from some that it made them aware of certain ways of being Iranian American that may have though were idiosyncratic of their household, but which turned out to be

more widespread among Iranians. Later in this section, I elaborate on how the shift from parental to peer-relations works with a particular case.

What I want to note here is that Shiva's web usage allows her the possibility of maintaining a connection with her parental house and the places she left behind in Orange County. The particular dynamic within her family contributes to this because they are "not phone people." And so, a web-mediated sociality develops in which she stays in touch without going out of her way to do so while on the road. Moving away from her parental house shapes Shiva's web usage because of the family obligation it places on Shiva to stay in touch. Her particular setup of linked web applications makes it possible to meet that obligation, while her web searches did not allow her to experience a sense of home while reading about and seeing photos of a new place. In following, I use the example of another young woman and her Facebook use to elaborate on the point about fulfilling obligations to family.

Beeta's mom on Facebook

Shiva was not alone in setting up "social media" networks as a way of keeping in touch with family over distances. Beeta, another young woman in her 20s, set up a Facebook account for her mother so she could keep in contact with her by posting photos of the things she does and places she goes. Beeta lives near her college campus in LA, while her parents live in her familial home in Palos Verdes with her 5-year-old sister whose life Beeta tries to be an active part of, albeit from a distance and through irregular visits when possible. Beeta says her connection with her family has been an important part of how she has been able to maintain her values throughout the changes of moving to college and becoming more independent. She describes her family as being religious and an important source of support for her religious practices, alongside the Muslim student organization of which she is a part, and the IMAN Cultural Center she and her siblings grew up around, a place she still visits at times. By setting up a Facebook account for her mother and linking it to her

own via a Facebook “friendship,” Beeta is comforted by the fact that her mother can see what she does via her Facebook profile. She experiences it as a form of pleasant security and form of (self) control/discipline:

I opened my mom a Facebook because I was like, mom, I want you to see these pictures and I want you to see what’s going on. It’s so much easier. And it’s cute that I know that my mom can keep tabs on me - which for some reason really doesn’t bother me - and also it keeps me in line. I feel like if I would do anything that I would lie about I really shouldn’t be doing it. So I made my mom a Facebook, so I could keep myself to that. I’m really weird.

While Beeta is only an hour and a half drive away from her parents, she is not able to maintain the daily, face to face contact with her family she so values as part of family life. She uses the “social media” application Facebook to post photos of herself with friends, articles, and links to her personal blog, which features pieces on anything from her favorite interior designers, to Persian poetry she likes, to the topic of debate in a class on Middle Eastern history that week, or a reflection on her practice of Islam. The linkage of the blog to Facebook parallels Shiva’s linkage between her blog and her Twitter and Facebook accounts as postings on the latter sites notified her contacts of new blog content. In the case of both these young women, family members and friends are included together as audiences for her postings. For Beeta, this connection with her family represents an expression of her religion as well. When she moved away to college she saw Islam as an important way to stay focused on her priorities in light of widespread LA and college party lifestyles among those around her. She recounted stories about friends that she said made her wonder what they are doing with their lives. Beeta’s Facebook relationship with her mother solidifies this connection to maintaining a moral lifestyle. However, it also goes beyond her family’s expression of religion because of her decision to wear a headscarf and pray five times a day.

Other women I spoke to also mentioned the significance of social media for keeping in touch with family locally. Thirty year old medical intern, Anita, used Facebook to stay in

contact with the many extended family members on both hers and her husband's sides of the family, also describing internet communications as a way for her to fulfill her obligations to the extensive family network located in the area, a task that could be difficult at times, with some living as far as Ventura County, and given her busy work schedule and wide family network living in Southern California. The practices of my respondents uphold the parental house as a place of home, a place to which affective relationships are maintained through the family members who continue inhabit it. As these young people move back and forth to their respective parental houses, they contest the feeling of home it can give/keep giving them, either because of changes in themselves or changes in those places. While they enter life phases of moving out, their ways of being at home and as part of a family change. As they come to feel at home in new places, they have anchors to social and sometimes religious discipline, obligation, and fulfillment. And their web usage helps them to remain anchored in this way.

The three women described here all call themselves Muslim.⁶² Although their religious practices are divergent from one another, their lives look very different from one another's, and they do not know one another, their use of Facebook to engage with family life in light of local distances from their family houses share important elements in common. Namely, they are at home between their parental homes and the new places they develop connections to, and their web usage supports them in positioning themselves in this way. These women use Facebook to be part of their respective, relatively pious Iranian families by staying a part of everyday family life while living at a distance from the household. Their (mostly local) mobility combines with their internet usage to sustain pre-existing, close, social relationships with family members. In the following, I will use examples of relationships of Iranian American peers outside the parental house to show how elements

⁶² For each of these young women, being Muslim intertwined with their Iranian American-ness. While growing up, they are introduced to Islam through their parents and are immersed in the social contacts of the family around mosques or in other religious gatherings that other Iranians in their environment participate in, thus becoming part of Iranian Muslim social practices, both within their families and among other Muslims.

of family relationships are maintained through peer relationships outside the parental house, and how web usage becomes part of the process of making new places of home.

Student mailing lists

Aash Night is the yearly welcoming activity that the Iranian Student Group (ISG) puts on. This is when (new) members of the student organization are welcomed (back) to campus by sharing a home-cooked portion of *aash*. The *aash* is announced as being made by the mother of Aida – one of the board members of ISG – and the recipients of the portions being dished out by the ISG board members are welcomed into their new peer group. The courtyard is filled with a flurry of chatter as a long line forms in front of the table where the dish is being served, and a great many of those here are of the second generation. Across the path, large Persian rugs are laid over the grassy patch in the middle of the courtyard and the bodies of Aash Night's attendees sit, recline, and eat on them as the sun goes down. This activity, organized within the spaces of the university, is meant to form cohesion among Iranian American peers. The connection with family is made through a parent's homemade *aash* (as the young organizers claim not being able to make the dish to the same standard themselves). With the symbolic presence of an absent mother and notions of "home cooking" and practices sharing Iranian food as though at home with one's family, notions of being Iranian American among peers becomes ambiguously entwined with the parents, family, and experiences of inhabiting a parental house.

Equally, some of these students express the close connections they build with one another as reflecting a figurative "family." In particular, a number of ISG members refer to their collective travel experience during a collective ski trip as a crucial moment in the building of this feeling of family or surrogate family. Pardis describes how she sees her fellow ISG board members as being her new family away from her parental home. Additionally, the term "family" was also used with reference to the special bonds built among campers at IAAB's yearly youth leadership camp called Camp Ayandeh (Camp Future). The student

organization also holds an annual camp (albeit less elaborate in terms of pedagogical goals and more focused on social bonds), which participants described as central to the initial formation of their friendships with other Iranian Americans at their university. These camps are framed by their second generation organizers and participants as being as much about independence as forming a collective sense of Iranian American-ness among peers.

Social media applications (mostly Facebook) and email lists are a central mode of communication for these student organizations, as are they use the Google applications Groups and Documents among members of the organization's board. They also use email and their website to publicize their events to all members, as well as for documenting them afterwards. But their events and gatherings themselves allow physical proximities that these media forms do not allow, and which participants find particularly important. This is clear from the collective, embodied experience of Aash Night, but also other interactive group activities I observed among this student organization's members. This is how my respondents create the surrogate families mentioned above.

The places in which these young people gather allow them to make visible to one another, their members, and other students (as in the case of *Aash Night*), their collective and organized presence on campus, demonstrating co-ordination and co-operation but also closeness and friendships. For many, these activities create a family of peers that offers a feeling of belonging. They consume their *aash* together and participate in a large and lively group of interpersonal interactions, and meet new people. These sometimes involve expressions of both verbal physical closeness and affection, including among board members like Pardis, Beeta, Atiya, Yasi, and Kourosh, who are comfortable around one another, each leaning with an arm around the other as they describe the development of their friendships.

As their relationships go through troubles and repeated moves over time, not to mention graduation, these friends remain connected with one another, including through their uses of social media such as Intragram and Facebook. These close friendships offer a sense of intimacy around practices of being Iranian American. And despite mentioning the time and

energy demands of the organization and the challenges of balancing it with their studies as well as the occasional “drama” of teamwork and difficulties of working with other Iranian American organizations, they underscore the value these activities have added to their college lives and their Iranian American-ness.

The places in which college life unfolds are important. The closeness of sharing physical proximity – whether by living on or near campus together, studying and attending classes together, or attending organized social events with the Iranian student group – means that close peer relationships develop and maintained between Iranian American peers. The act of gathering in these face-to-face settings, within the spaces of the university campus, in habitual and sometimes ritualistic ways (particularly with the annually-repeated and symbolic events like *aash night*) that makes places of peer gathering a peer-based home away from the parental home.

College life on campus also demands of my respondents that they work behind computers (most often laptops) for large parts of their days. Hence, the interactions of student board members via email and instant chat with one another are just another part of a seemingly ever-ongoing flow of exchanges around studies, organizing, and student life more generally. For those who are subscribed to the email list of the organization, the reminders about events and gatherings are a frequent and casual prompt to come to events and to bring others. Mailing lists and social media are a key part of publicizing, organizing, and mobilizing for student events where surrogate families form through embodied collective experience.

Use of particular web applications become embedded in activities of student organizing around Iranian American-ness, foster communication within social groups, facilitate face-to-face gatherings, and are shaped by the conventions of contemporary student life (i.e. the constancy of being both behind the computer and around other students). I have argued here that an Iranian American (peer-based) home away from (the parental) home is formed in places like college campuses through a combination of the experiences that the places themselves make possible and the practices that web usages make possible. I now

move on to bringing this example together with those recounted earlier in this section about the family house.

Finding new families, keeping old ones

In the previous section I demonstrated how my respondents' respective familial house, and their movement away from it, is significant for the ways they feel at home as Iranian Americans. Parental houses, as locations of growing up, shape the development of particular styles of being Iranian American. The moral practices of Shiva, Anita, and Beeta were examples of this. Others also had their ways of being Iranian American rooted in the moralities of their family relationships (that is, this was not only in Muslim families).⁶³ I saw this in the accounts of two young women who knew one another from growing up in Oklahoma. Sarah and Negar said that they maintained their mid-Western ways (how are these?) of being Iranian American while living LA. That is, their families and children of family friends practiced their Iranian American-ness in low key, "laid-back" ways that, as Sarah described them. This did not involve getting dressed up and going to clubs with peers like LA Iranian-ness did, but staying at home, watching films together, chatting, and playing cards (Sarah was an avid player of the Iranian card game, *hokm*, with other Iranian Americans).

Sarah attributed her modest style of being Iranian American to the families which she had grown up around, especially her friendships with her generational counterparts within those families, who she felt were like brothers and sisters to her. It is the moral style of these social relationships that provides a feeling of home, and evidently this sense of home continues to shape Iranian American-ness as these young people make moves further into

⁶³ In a way, private family life and relationships become more public through the use of blogs and Facebook pages to update family. This is a point I do not have the means to elaborate upon in this discussion, but is relevant to the ways in which internet media shapes these family relationships as they are influenced by particular forms of mobility.

adulthood. At the same time, distance is necessary for this to take effect. In both Beeta and Sarah's cases it was necessary for them to make a move in order to understand the differences between their family lives of being Iranian American and the ways this was done outside that place of home. The ways the young women I discussed social media platforms were in line with their moral responsibilities of being good Iranian American daughters. As Madianou and Miller have argued, people's choices to use certain media forms illuminate the social, moral, and emotional responsibilities they have as part of what the authors call relationship management (2012).

Valuable work that attends to internet practices within households has tended not to focus on notions of migrant identity (see Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006). Nevertheless, such work offers relevant insights for understanding web usage among young, second-generation migrants. Namely that family life, leisure, and social values shape how web applications are taken up. Livingstone pertinently argues that "media culture, youth culture, consumer culture, are increasingly intertwined, creating generation gaps and gender differences in everyday culture" (Livingstone, 2003: 21), and shows this by solidly focusing on web usage within the household. I have suggested that the use of web applications may be equally socially shaped by exit from the household and the changing/maintenance of social values associated with that. To some extent, my respondents' practices are not specifically shaped by their migrant backgrounds but their social circumstances. When it comes to life cycle changes, the web usage of their broader cohort of American (chronological) generational counterparts may be shaped by similar milestones. This furthers what migration scholarship arguing for attention to "life cycle" factors has suggested (Levitt, 2002).

But in addition to being socially shaped, my respondents' web usage reflects how specific web applications are used towards specific purposes due to what they allow. For instance, a social media application that sends phone notifications and helps share photos is used to keep in touch with parents, while a mass mailing list is useful for student organizations to make first contact with their constituency. Likewise, it is evident what even this range of

applications does not appear to allow. For instance, the formation of home feelings for a new place, or a sense of familial relationship with peers with whom face to face friendships have not yet been built.

The case of these young people offers interesting insights for research on migrants and media. Research on the media usage of migrants within their families has tended to focus on how relationships are mediated by internet transnationally. This work includes the discussion of how family members' roles (Madianou & Miller, 2012) and "social and cultural contexts of family life" (Wilding, 2006: 125) shape the kinds of transnational digital media usage that transmigrants engage in. Because of the focus on transnational interactions among diaspora groups, the kind of movement and transition I have discussed in the cases of Sarah, Beeta, and Shiva is not something that has gained much attention in migration research. Nagle and Staeheli have sought to complicate this persistent "homeland" focus in migration and internet research by dealing with migrant political activism in a way that "avoids privileging any single geographical scale or location" (Nagle & Staeheli, 2010).

In line with this, I have shown the importance of also focusing on web usage among mobile, migrant family members *within* the country of "settlement." By focusing on one pivotal moment of the life-cycle of the second generation – moving out of the family house – I show how web usage becomes a way to shape one's family and peer relationships that are oriented around Iranian American-ness. Web usage here mediates normative obligations, changing preferences, and life-cycle stages. And these require fluctuating degrees and forms of proximity and distance from family in order for my respondents' to feel at home. The instances I have discussed reflect the significance of web usage in how my respondents carefully negotiate proximity and distance from their family members as their lives develop.

My respondents also repeatedly raised issues of family comforts, but also pressures. However, these pressures were not presented as publicly as the positive, common picture of Iranians as "family-oriented". This was particularly framed with relation to the pressures

to perform, achieve, and be successful, in the ways comparable to the pressures that other second-generation immigrant Americans have been shown to experience via parents (Levitt & Waters, 2006). Among my particular group of respondents, the issue was raised much less on their own behalves, but strongly as a general problem in “the community,” or as something temporary that a respondent had overcome individually, for instance after realizing where her/his individual passions lie.⁶⁴

The family households where my respondents’ grew up seem to be neither simply oppressive nor perfect, and leaving them was neither a clear escape nor a complete loss. Yet family relations seemed to serve as models or metaphors for feelings of home. This appeared to remain so, even as connections to the family house were evidently a set of dynamic relations subject to change and movement as young people’s Iranian American-ness is practiced in new contexts. The parental home, as a place of home, remained a reference point in specific ways as my respondents exercised their connected mobility through practices of being at home in new places. In the following, families remain pertinent to my discussion as I move on to discuss circuits of transnational movement to, and communication with, places and family members in Iran.

Embodying visions of return

Blogging return

Ali made a film during one of his first trips to Tehran. Having been born in the US and grown up in LA, Ali traveled to Tehran as a 21 year old film school student for the first time. The title of his self-funded documentary film is *Tehran: Another Side*, and it spells out his

⁶⁴ Overall I did not observe family pressures around success, wealth, and profession among my respondents to be more significant than exceeding pressures that came with more wide-spread factors such as job scarcity, work pressures, and questions about interests and career goals. However, the fact that so many of my respondents refer to generalized pressures to succeed professionally and financially, suggests that this pressure is nevertheless something that young people see as defining Iranian American-ness, and perhaps comes from sources outside the family as well such as other Iranian Americans.

purpose of disclosing to his audience a side of Iran and its capital city that are different from the dominant media representations focusing on the Islamic regime and nuclear issue. His film frames certain elements of urban life in Tehran in terms of his own personal journey, discoveries, and reflections about it. It centralizes elements of the urban environment, with its skyscrapers and thoroughfares. It includes interview segments on bustling streets, as well as coverage of the city's underground rap scene and its key artists. Ali made it clear that he had a particular audience in mind when making the film, and had the object of changing their perceptions about what Iran's urban environments look like. This is how he described that audience:

People who you go to school with, people who we walk the streets with every day, people who I get into elevators with every day, who are wearing a suit and a tie and looking wonderful and super professional on their way to work... normal people just like you and I... Iranians! My own friends, who haven't been to Iran since they were a year old... when I tell them that people drive Mercedes Benz in Iran, or that Iran has 30 story high-rises with penthouse apartments that are huge, exquisite, and luxurious, they don't believe me at all... They're my friends, they're Iranian, and they don't believe me. So this is why visuals need to be shown and film is a perfect medium to be used for that purpose.

Ali sees it as his task to portray places in Iran as developed, urban, modern, and even wealthy to audiences like the people he has contact with in LA. And these include other Iranian Americans who are his friends. On multiple occasions in the film -- in the voiceover and in the interview questions he poses -- Ali explicitly refers to images that "Westerners" have about Iran as a rural, backward, and underdeveloped country, and contrasts this to the film's visuals and his own impressions of the city of Tehran. He uses the portrayals of the modernity of the Tehran as a means to discredit myths about Iran as being behind in its development. For him this is a way to show the city in a different light than his audience usually sees. It is intended to offer an element of discovery to his audience, including other

members of the second generation, one which represents a parallel to his own discovery of Tehran as what he calls his “second home” in the film.

Showing “another side” of Iran in this way was a task more of my respondents took upon themselves. Especially those who returned to Iran for the first time in their adult lives.⁶⁵ And most of them engaged in media production – whether through a personal blog or a documentary film – both during and after their return travels. The significance of second generation travel to Iran is evident in the rising attention for amateur documentary films and blogs produced by returnees as well as publication of novels like *Lipstick Jihad*, *Soul of Iran*, *To See and See Again*, (Darznik, 2008; Whitlock, 2008) that are written by second generation authors. The theme also emerged in IAAB’s conference on Iranian diaspora in 2009 that included a panel about second-generation return to Iran from various perspectives. The question of return is, therefore, very much a part of the lives of my respondents, regardless of how they answer this question at different moments of their lives. And the use of various media forms to formulate, share, and make sense of these experiences of and desires for return (or lack thereof) in their second-generation lives is an important part of this.

Like Ali, Justin’s film, *Warring Factions* was also a documentary film about this second generation individual’s discovery of Iran as an Iranian, Muslim American, and b-boy dancer (or break dancer). Justin was also the protagonist of this story of first-time return to Iran – the country of his father’s birth – and he, too, felt he had developed relationships over the period of his visit that gave him a sense of being in a surrogate or second home. For instance, he responds to a question about whether he felt at home in Iran in the following way.

One moment that probably stands out the most was during my last trip to Iran while I was making my film. I was in the metro with the group of B-boys [male

⁶⁵ To reiterate, these return journeys are travel experiences, and not return undertaken with the intention of repatriation to Iran as a resident. Perceptions of Iranians in Southern California about return has been researched by Hossein Abdi (Abdi, 2003).

breakdancers] that I was practicing with in Iran, speaking less than perfect Persian. A man standing near us rudely barked at me to "speak properly," prompting my 5 friends to stand up and get in his face in my defense, saying that I was an Iranian visiting from America and that I was their guest. I felt as if this was something my own B-boy friends would do for me in the US and truly felt like I was at home even though I was so far from my real home.

Like Ali's experience, Justin's anecdote refers to an experience that made him feel at home in Iran, while also referring to his "real home" as the US. It is a new and discovered sense of home as an outsider to a new place. Engaging with Iran in this way is specific to the second generation because of the experience of discovering a place of home that was hitherto unfamiliar.

Another example of a debut documentary about an experience of return is Nooshin Navidi's *Young Republic*. While her film focuses on the perceptions of young people in Esfahan, Iran, it also features her own observations and personal experiences, and is accompanied by a website with video, photographic, and written documentation of her observations as well as historical information about the places she visited in Iran. Nooshin has also made a host of podcasts that are for sale on iTunes under the title, *Discover Iran*, and are categorized predominantly by place, and cover the cities of Shiraz, Bandar Abbas, Kish Island, Southeastern Iran, etc.

When posting on Iranian.com to promote her podcast series, Nooshin writes that she shows a side of Iran that "is ALWAYS left out by mainstream media," As producers, my respondents' audience is imagined primarily as an American one, which they want to inform in new and audiovisual ways.⁶⁶ They also include an audience of friends and family

⁶⁶ However, there are sometimes unforeseen and important consequences because of the use of internet for dissemination of return stories (what do you want to argue here?). For instance, Justin's film, *Warring Factions*, had received more orders from Iran-based customers than US-based ones when he spoke about sales in 2009. I discuss the implications of this unanticipated audience in Justin's case in Chapter 4. The point here is that creating informative yet humanized/humanizing images of Iran and Iranians are made with American audiences in mind who lack exposure to such representations.

who have been left temporarily and are made part of one's life experiences through these media products. While Nooshin and other filmmakers I have mentioned are explicit about the importance of the visual element of film in *showing* another side of Iran, Shiva expresses a similar motive when speaking about why she started writing her a blog upon her first-time return to Iran. On it she documents her experiences, and gives information about the places, ritual practices, and everyday occurrences that come her way during her stay in Esfahan and travels to different parts of the country. These young people use digital film and web applications to share visual, audio, and textual content that documents their explorations of Iran in the style of an individual travel diary. In contrast to memoirs published about women whose lives span between the diaspora and Iran,⁶⁷ these productions do not highlight experiences around the revolution, but are instead situated firmly in the protagonists' first-time experiences of Iran that do not bring a sentimental, narrative to stories told about Iran's past, and do so with heavy reliance on visual rather than textual forms.

Their sense of home is formed through the combination of physical travel and mediated story-telling about that experience. Web applications like blogs and the social media platform, YouTube allow them to generate interest in their productions and spin off additional content from their trips, offering supplements to these productions that fit within the established film genre. These applications fit into a wider trend of promoting media productions via the web and offering the possibility for young filmmakers to disseminate their work to audiences more readily. US-based audiences are the primary target for the products my respondents make. While Iran becomes a discovered national place of home, the US becomes the taken-for-granted, primary reference point. My respondents narrate their experiences of return travel as a discovery of home. But this feeling also has limits. Shiva says, for instance, that her time spent in Iran during the year she studied Persian language there at a private institute showed her how comfortable she

⁶⁷ See, for instance, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* by Marjan Satrapi (2004) and *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* by Tara Bahrapour.

could feel among her family in Esfahan. But she also said it sometimes her feel that at times she was “hanging by a thread” when it came to daily situations that she did not feel she grasped or could clearly follow socio-culturally and linguistically. My respondents do not shed their outsider status; Justin’s anecdote of feeling at home among friends/relatives in Tehran was also preceded by an experience of social exclusion. The position of being an outsider is useful for some. Nooshin even says she uses this position of being an outsider -- specifically as an American but also a half-Japanese woman who acknowledges that she does not look typically Iranian -- to ask more questions and get responses from the characters in her film.

Traveling to and being present in Iran affords the possibility of (audio-visually) and narrating how they are at home in Iran. It is less the representations of important places and more the embodied undertaking of going to and being in Iran as a new place that underpin their experiences. The stories they use web applications to tell (while incorporating various digital media forms) are specifically their own, second-generation stories, as their personal journeys of discovery reflect. Their use of the genres of documentary film and travel diary/travelogue-writing afford them the possibility of representing Iran and their own transformation. These productions frame their experiences for primarily American audiences, and for most, reinforces and makes explicit the taken-for-granted American home. Yet through this combination of travel and representation, Iran becomes a place of home, albeit an ambiguous, found, “second home,” which is encountered differently than the US (after all, they do not make documentaries about everyday life in the US and sense of home). My respondents’ travel between the US and Iran, and their use of certain web applications in the process, become part of how these young people are at home both in Iran and the US in different ways.

Pardis' taste of two homes

Pardis' parents have always been the source of stories about Iran for her. Below, she speaks about the well-known location of Darband right outside the city of Tehran, which is associated with leisure and free time in the outdoors.

Everybody used to talk about Darband and how beautiful it was and how it's in the mountains. I could never really put a picture. But seeing that then, it kind of brought everything a little closer. I wouldn't say that the puzzle's totally complete, but just putting a lot of images to a lot of the stories, it just makes everything so much more real. A lot of that also came from seeing my mom interact with her siblings, and where she lived and all of that. It helps bring everything closer. Because all the stories I heard about this or that *baagh*, and we used to pick *shaatoot* and eat it off the trees, I actually saw them do that and I actually ate that *shatoot*, and I know what it is, and it's a lot of bringing closer together of two different lives. And it was really nice.

For Pardis, the imagery of Iran as a place had been instilled by her parents from when she was very young. She refers to this as a consistent counterweight to the upheaval in Tehran during the time she was visiting in the summer of 2009.

My image of Iran didn't really change even though I did see all that stuff. I still see Iran as the beautiful, perfect place, and I think it will really take a lot to actually change the image in my brain, and maybe it'll never really change.

Through the stories of other returnees and the memories handed down by their parents, images of places in Iran take shape for the second generation. Visiting sites bestowed with significance through these stories and images, makes them "more real" for Pardis, reinforcing pre-existing images, and confirming her affective attachment to them. It is noteworthy that Pardis describes visual, tactile, and gustatory experiences as central to the way these places are enforced as important reference points for her national

identification. The intersection of the ideally imagined places and the embodied experiences of physically being there is significant to this process of making emotional attachments to Iran.

But Pardis did not only get her images about places in Iran from her parents. Pardis listens to the music of Iranian pop artist Sassy Mankan. She plays the songs at home and in her car when she is driving. Recounting her experience of visiting Tehran for the first time in the summer of 2009, Pardis speaks of the excitement she experienced having recognized places and things in Iran that she knew from Sassy Mankan songs. Attention among the Iranian American diaspora rose for this musical genre as it was noticeably played on internet radio channel, Radio Javan, and written about (in English) by the web-based San Francisco Iranian American music magazine, *Beyond Persia*. The electronic “6/8” (pronounced as sish-o-hasht in Persian) beats of this pop genre gained recognition as a quintessentially urban music style that found its way to the diaspora through individuals making mp3 copies for one another. Then, stored in digital memory devices and disks, the recordings made their way through underground music circuits in Tehran and eventually out of the country with travelers, finally being openly disseminated abroad through (web) radio stations like Javaan.

Pardis mentions a Sassy Mankan song that refers to a Pizza store and youth hangout in Tehran. She was excited to finally see the store and eat the Pizza there, saying that it tasted just as good as she had expected it would. These songs create reference points in particular places inside Iran, even for people like Pardis who are not familiar with the city. The Sassy Mankan songs take on a similar role to Pardis’ parents’ stories, and in both cases, Pardis describes sensory experiences – visual/ tactile/gustatory -- as central to the way these places are enforced as important references points for belonging and attachment to Iran. Both parents’ passed-down memories and contemporary popular media coming out of Iran and circulating in among diaspora youth are both part of how some of someone like Pardis imagines and feels connections to places in Iran.

Digital copies and online radio stations is how some pop cultural production coming out of Iran finds its way to second generation living in LA. The styles coming out of Iran are interesting to a number of my respondents, who express intrigue as to what young, urban Iranians are doing. Houshi described his delight at finding out how much US/international popular cultural tastes shared in common with young Iranians he met on his first visit to Iran as an adult. But he also mentioned having an interest in learning about the styles or that were particular to contemporary youth living in Tehran. Arash also recounted fondly his experiences of finding out how Esfahani party/nightlife was practiced on one of his visits. Often the Iranian American visitors' interlocutors were their own family members of the same age (mostly cousins), and friends thereof. This image of Iran as urban, hip, trendy, but also underground, raw, and expressive is in line with the image of Tehran that many of my second-generation respondents had of Tehran as a modern place and haven of youth culture.

This engagement with urban Iranian cultural scenes was evident in the interest among my respondents in art made by Iranian artists shown in LA settings,⁶⁸ including among those who had not travelled to Iran. Transnational media circuits allow my respondents to develop images of Iran, the experience of physical return in particular allows people to create their own stories about Iran and discover their own feeling of home there. The role of web usage in the examples discussed in the first part of this section on return were about making one's own productions around return experiences. The return experiences of Pardis and others discussed here show how internet becomes part of pop cultural circuits between the US and Iran, which help my respondents make sense of their discoveries and experiences of return visits to Iran and feel a sense of home through a certain degree of recognition of places and practices. Both parental stories and youth cultural styles offer such connections.

⁶⁸ I see LA exhibits such as Urban Iran (various artists) that Amitis curated in 2009 and the Icy and Sot exhibit in 2013 that Aryana was enthusiastic about as part of this.

Staying in touch

Pardis, like others, stays in touch with her family in Iran after having come back to LA from her travels to Iran. She says she does this primarily through text messages with her family members, her aunt and uncle, describing how her phone bill is extremely high because of this. She says she sends messages on a weekly, sometimes daily basis to keep up to date with the lives of her family members, especially to keep track of how they are doing since the recent death of her uncle, which was the main reason that she returned with her family in the summer of 2009. A friend of Pardis', Atiya, similarly describes keeping in touch with her family through telephone calls. Like Pardis, since her first return trip as an adult, her relationship with her aunts, uncles, and cousins was dramatically strengthened, such that everyday contact with them has become normal.

Before having made her most recent trip to Iran, Atiya says, she would talk to her family members in Iran on the phone at her parents' house, but it would be more of a formality. But after the trip, she speaks with her uncle because she wants to.

We have this calling plan where it's really cheap minutes and you get billed every month and it works out really good... None of my family members use the internet that much, at least if they do, they don't talk to me through it. It's all through telephone.

It is striking how (mobile) telephone use overshadows internet communications in the ways these relationships are upheld. Pardis mentions an obstacle to her communications via internet media when she describes a moment when she wanted to share photographs with her family in Iran, and her immediate idea was to post them on Facebook where her whole family would see, but she caught herself not knowing whether surveillance of the internet would make it unsafe to do so for her family members. In that case, a lack of security was the reason for her to refrain from internet communications. Atiya said her own preference for telephone contact was because internet in Iran was slow and unreliable. For many it is common knowledge that faster internet speeds are impeded by

the government's efforts to control content, therefore making it difficult to use applications that use higher levels of bandwidth inside Iran.

Young women like Pardis and Atiya cultivate relationships with family in Iran from a distance. Yet the day to day practice of being in touch in this way does not quell their strong desires to return again soon. Like more of my respondents, their plans for more frequent return are impeded by time and monetary limitations due to studies, work, or unemployment. While these two young women speak fondly of their visits to Iran as a country and a whole, their practices ensure that they are strongly attached to particular places in the country. For Atiya the locus of emotional attachment is the city of Rasht, by the Caspian coast, where her mother's side of the family still lives. She contrasts her experiences of visiting Rasht with her time spent in Tehran with her father's side of the family on her first return trip, saying "we went there [Tehran] and I cried for like 5 hours... I said "why are we here?" I'd rather be with my cousins. I'd rather be in Rasht, with my uncle." Interestingly, any experience of homecoming for Nastaran takes place in Rasht and not Tehran, yet it no less of a national homecoming and she is no more *Rashti* than Iranian in the context of this return story.

For Atiya, Rasht is nevertheless the place where she goes to be close to her mother's youngest sister during the last stages of her pregnancy, where she was present for the birth of her cousin and held the baby for the first time. Her mother's side of the family is her strongest association with feeling at home in Iran. But she expresses her attachment through a love for Rasht as a locale of national homecoming and return, and sees this attachment as an important part of what makes her Iranian. The deep importance of physical presence and attachment to place through embodied experience is apparent in many of my respondents' accounts, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Beeta's statement that she wants to be buried in Iran after her death. Sitting in her car in a UCLA parking lot before we say goodbye after having met for lunch one afternoon, Mina confides that although she finds it difficult as a young person to express this wish in any open way (she thinks it would be considered unconventional or morbid for someone her age to

consider such a thing). Nevertheless, she resolutely expresses her wish to be buried on Iranian soil when she passes away.

For these young women, their emplaced experiences and attachments are essential to their relationship with Iran. These connections are to the people and places with which they associate their familial homecoming and temporary national repatriation. In terms of maintaining these transnational relationships with family members, telephone communications seem to eclipse internet communications as a meaningful and regular media practice⁶⁹ for women like Pardis and Atiya with the people they are closest to in Iran – older relatives such as aunts and uncles. In the following I bring the examples I have discussed about return travel so far together to argue that the embodied experience of return travel to Iran intersects with web usage to given my respondents a sense of home.

Going back for more

In existing research on second generation migrants, the role of the parental generation is often pointed out as arbitrating and instilling in the younger generation the importance of the cultural maintenance of the country of origin. This work highlights the role of parents as guardians of cultural “authenticity” of the home country (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Levitt & Waters, 2006). Or it argues that a “cultural transnationalism” plays itself out in the realm of the emotions when values, expectations, and “family ideologies” that are rooted in the country of origin are applied by parents to their children growing up in the US (Wolf, 2006: 275-279).⁷⁰ This pays less attention to how members of the second generation actively authenticate their own feelings of being at home. Practices of return and the search for a “real” sense of home through one’s own experience, even if it is a second home or an

⁶⁹ I also noticed in the field that others have experiences of internet telephony with relatives back in Iran, but my impression was that the issues of low bandwidth internet connections of relatives inside Iran outweigh the low cost advantage.

⁷⁰ See Wolf’s concept of “emotional transnationalism,” which she develops based on study of second-generation Filipino Americans in California.

ambivalent relationship to it, still speaks to the importance of this particular travel practice.

My respondents experience transformative feelings of discovery by being in certain places in Iran. This shapes their understandings of Iranian home, however ambivalent. This reflects what Brah discusses as the importance of the interaction between the body and locality, particularly through the senses, in producing a ways of “being at home.” In the first instance, this quote indicates how places act upon people, which is relevant to understanding the processes of discovery and transformation I have discussed.

Being at home involves the ‘immersion of a self in a locality’. The locality ‘intrudes’ upon the self through the senses, defining ‘what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers’. Equally the self penetrates the locality. Accordingly the boundaries between home and self and between home and away are permeable. As such when one moves away from home the movement itself occurs in relation to home, it is part of the very ‘constitution’ of home itself.

In addition, movement, as described here, is pertinent to the “constitution” of a US home. The act of moving away from home in the US by going to Iran makes the former the center of attention in my respondents’ productions of media; it clearly becomes the “first home” by implication of the discovery of a “second” one. Communication of this experience of discovery and transformation (for largely American-based audiences) not only helps maintain the connection to Iran after people have returned to their lives in the US through the document, but also maintains the connection to the US while they are in Iran. Their experience also reinforces the status of their American home. This is evocative of Blunt and Dowling’s discussion of second-generation Chinese and Korean American returnees, which finds that returnees express an explicit sense of closer affinity to the United States as home due to their return experiences and the ambivalence that comes with it (Blunt & Dowling, 2006).

While there is an element of this, it is not the whole story. My respondents also experience their return as transforming Iran from nostalgic stories passed down from parents or others, into a place they incorporate into their own practices of maintaining transnational social contacts. The experiential aspects of their relationship to places inside Iran and their own feeling of being at home there upon embodied return are central. These experiences are particular to their second-generation status as they do not have their own recollections of these places as many of the first generation who fled or otherwise left Iran do, and their encounters are therefore untouched by such (often difficult) memories.

Research on the formation of transnational social fields perspective(refs?) has made mention of internet as operating alongside telephone calls and international aviation in helping second generation Indian Canadians in “maintaining cross-border communication” within transnational family relations, allowing them to remain both physically and emotionally embedded in both country of “settlement” and “origin” (Somerville, 2001: 30). My discussion supports this, as my respondents’ use web applications alongside various other media practices. In certain relationships with family members in Iran, phone calls remain the central means for staying in touch. Evidently, web applications do not offer the same social possibilities for maintaining these cross-border family relationships.

Nevertheless, their use of web applications reflects a combination of (mediated) ways of engaging with notions of return and homeland. That is, their web usage reflects mobilization of established genres of cultural production such as documentary film and travel writing, and this styles their representations of Iran and Iranian-ness. Yet, web applications also come with their own particular possibilities. That is, my respondents’ web-based productions make their stories of return accessible to wider audiences, notably, other members of the second generation. And they also allow young people to narrate their own stories digitally, and thus authenticate their own homeland discovery experiences.

It should be noted here that not all my respondents returned regularly to Iran, and most did so only a few times in their lives. Those who have not returned develop their own imaginaries of Iran, even if they do not imagine Iran as home. Both Sarah’s and Sepideh’s

ideas about Iran are a testament to this; Sarah imagines Iran in terms of its status as a developing country, in which she thinks she would feel out of place, and Sepideh says she does not feel the desire to visit. Both of them acknowledge that this feeling has not remained static for them over time, and that it may change at another point in their lives. But these sentiments are in contrast, for instance, with Asa's imagination of Iran. Although she is also a non-returnee, Asa was born in Iran, and unlike Sarah and Sepideh, has childhood memories of moments and places swathed in nostalgic, sensory impressions such as the sight and smell of her grandmother and mother in the kitchen, chopping fragrant herbs for the elaborate traditional dishes they made.

For some not returning is a choice made based on their uninspiring imaginaries of a country they have never been in and do not miss. Whereas for many others - despite their young age of migration - their nostalgia for an Iran of their childhood/past resembles elements of exile longing and remembering rooted in emotive, sensory experience (see Seremataakis, 1996). Whether it is through the return travel as an adult or through remembering sensory experience from childhood, embodied experiences of being in Iran are central to how my respondents relate to it as home (or not). This informs their use of web applications, and as I have tried to show in this section, these forms of web usage configure new possibilities for forming diaspora home through experiences of return.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed how my respondents' digital media usage is integrated into their oscillations between dwelling in, and being mobile between the places in which they live their lives. In each of the chapter's sections respectively, I showed how trends of urban living in LA, the types of moral sociability emanating from the parental house, and the genres of representing transformative travel experiences all constitute styles of being Iranian American. In being at home, my respondents seek out emotional, experiential, and personalized approaches to representing and engaging with places that have relevance to

their second-generation lives. While they do this in ways that at times invoke and build upon the first generation's movements and traces, my respondents' own inhabitations of particular places crisscross the places that their parents' generation bestow(ed) with meaning through their (continued) inhabitation, thus re-shaping home.

As I have shown in this chapter, these places are important. Many people tend to derive a sense of intimate connection to these places and the other people who they co-inhabit them with. Furthermore, it is through their engagement with these places that my respondents are offered particular possibilities (typical cultural trends, social and moral expectations, transformative experiences) for being Iranian American. These engagements with places shape my respondents' ways of being at home as diaspora Iranian Americans. In a sense, "the house comes to occupy us as we come to occupy it," as Miller argues of home (2001). That is, home is not simply how people come to live in a place and what they make of it. It is also what that place makes of them. As I have shown, practices of being at home are shaped by life in amidst places in the city, between the family house and homes away from home, and between the US and in destinations of return travel in Iran. These places for being at home each shape certain styles of being Iranian American in their own ways.

My respondents' connections to place are certainly not mediated by web applications alone, but their web usage is a significant part of the changing ways in which these places are engaged with and inhabited by a new generation. Their web usage is embedded within these practices of being Iranian American. And in each of the cases I discussed, web usage comes with certain affordances, and certain convergences/divergences with other kinds of mediation. Web applications are combined with face-to-face interactions and abandoned for telephone communication, they remediate film and photography, and coalesce multi-platform, digital news media and social media sharing. My respondents' media practices reflect the kinds of connections they want to make in a certain instance, and they reflect how internet is better at doing some things than others.

Chapter 2 Re-presenting the Past

Introduction

“The internet is full of garbage,” the elderly bookstore owner said to me from behind the desk in his store. He went on:

I don’t even really use the computer. But that’s where young people look for information. The youth don’t know the history and geography of their country [Iran] from books anymore. And I will stop selling altogether at some point. But I don’t mind; I’ve retired and do this because I enjoy it.

The grey-haired bookstore owner got up from his desk and moved slowly towards a table of books in the middle of the store. He picked up a thin pamphlet. Its glossy paper was emblazoned with color photographs of iconic images of Takhte Jamshid (the ruins of Persepolis, capital of the ancient Achemaenid empire) and the outside of an intricately decorated mosque dome. “Iran” was printed in Persian and Roman script along with the title, “From Ancient Persia to contemporary Iran: selected historical milestones.” “It’s in English,” he said, handing the colorful pamphlet to me. “This is the kind of thing young people like you might read.” He continued describing his business:

Eighty five percent of our books are in Farsi, and many of them were written before or during the revolution. Young people are not interested in these books. The customers I have are from my own generation – we sometimes sit in the store and

have some tea and talk about politics. These books are unique, and most of them are out of print now.

As he spoke, the man motioned with an aged hand towards the ceiling-high shelves of books in his quaint store on Westwood Boulevard, the long-standing and well-known center of the Iranian American presence in LA. The book store owner was a respected figure in LA Iranian circles, greeted with much esteem and deep courtesy when arriving at a high-profile “community event” in his dark suit and polished shoes. From time to time he would give an interview on locally-based Persian language radio in which he would draw on his knowledge of Iranian political history for an LA-based Iranian audience close to his age, he presumed. Today, in the store, he turned his gaze to the boxy, grey computer monitor on his desk as he described his disinterest in “the internet.”

He was well aware that some Iranian book stores had embraced online sales in efforts to adapt and continue their businesses, but that was not for him. The computer on the desk was turned off, and the monitor half-covered by a cloth printed with a traditional Iranian Paisley⁷¹ design. A short walk up the Boulevard to another Iranian bookstore, and the mood about the local future of the Persian language book business was hardly different.

It won't be too long before I'm out of business. My books are almost all in Farsi and the younger generation doesn't even speak it. My own daughter doesn't understand me sometimes. My wife tells me to speak slower to her in Farsi.

The second bookstore owner picked up a book, comparatively thin beside the others on the shelf. “This is the direction it's going in. It's what sells now,” he said, holding up a copy of Firouzeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi: A memoir of growing up Iranian in America*, the humorous and intimate story of a second-generation Iranian American woman and her family. “I don't blame the youth for turning to the internet for information instead of books,” he added. “If I

⁷¹ In Persian, *botteh jegheh*

ask him, my son can look up and print historical and geographic information about Iran from the computer quicker than I can find in a book. And it's in their language, English."

To these bookstore owners, the future is at stake. Not only the futures of their respective businesses, but perhaps more importantly to them the future of knowledge about Iran's past. They see their books as holding this knowledge, able to pass it on. But they see this transmission as being interrupted by the changes going on. Limited print editions of books, international shipping, language barriers, competition on the book market, and the coming of age of the second generation together make up a cocktail of changes, and these men are concerned about what the next generation knows about Iran and its past. The concerns they expressed intensified my interest in finding out what the relevance of the past was for the younger generation they talked about. I was interested in young people's *own* perspectives about the future of the Iranian past. I wanted to know how this generation saw their lives as connected to a past. How did the past become appealing to them? How did this past make them Iranian American? And how did their web usage play into all this?

Hamid Naficy (1993) describes exile LA Iranians as holding on to a pristine Iranian homeland from the past by fetishizing it (with the help of media). Naficy has discussed the past in terms of the distance and pain of exile, the nostalgia for a homeland objectified, imagined, and fetishized in souvenirs, photos, etc. He understands this as an attempt to protect the past against further loss. Whether in personal memories, national glorifications, or both, the past is understood as synonymous with an Iranian homeland that can be remembered or forgotten; both options equally painful under conditions of exile (Naficy, 1993). Halleh Ghorashi's more recent work also describes how the Iranian past is remembered among LA Iranians, but argues that it is used more to claim diasporic belonging in the US than reify a lost national homeland. As Ghorashi shows, the ancient Persian past has been used as a discourse or source of possibility in the diaspora; mobilized, used, and adapted as a means of both distancing from the Islamic regime and laying claims in the American present through identity politics (Ghorashi, 2004). She argues that the past is not engaged with in terms of national boundaries (American and

Iranian) alone, but in terms of a diasporic belonging in the US that goes beyond such boundaries (ibid.).

In light of Naficy and Ghorashi's work on first-generation LA Iranians, my fieldwork in LA allowed me to address the question of what the second generation is doing with the past. Are they using the past to reify a distant nation of which they are a part? Are they seeking diasporic belonging in the place their parents settled? And how is this influenced by the ubiquity of digital media, in its many forms, in the lives of my respondents? In this chapter, I present an account of people's everyday practices of remembering the past and web usage to provide some answers to these questions. I do so within the wider frame of research on memory, specifically that which draws attention to the fact that it is almost impossible to study how the past is remembered without studying media and representations of the past (Connerton, 2006).⁷²

I argue in line with Ghorashi that my respondents choose and shape the narratives of the past they want to represent based on their claims in the (diasporic) present. However, they also feel the responsibility to conserve the past as something that is not of their own making, but rather something inherited. In this way, their practices align with a notion of cultural heritage: the production of the past for a collective in the present, while framing that past as inherited from antecedent others (Lowenthal, 1996: 23; 1985: 331). It is in this sense that I find literature on heritage formation useful for understanding my respondents' engagements with the past. I argue that the responsibility to conserve the past presents itself to my respondents as an appealing one, in particular because of the ways they are able to style their engagements with the past. This is the case whether their engagement with the past through web applications fits into the "edutainment" genre (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2005), an activist position, or a scholarly endeavor. The particular affordances of

⁷² The charting of this field owes much to the seminal works of Pierre Nora (1984) and Maurice Halbwach (1928), the work of whom anthropologist Paul Connerton refers to when sketching the developments in the study of memory (2006). David Berliner's (2005) critical tracking of the notion of memory in anthropology also explored and nuanced the importance of the study of memory for understanding culture and identity. (See also Connerton, 1989 in which he discusses the role of embodied practices of remembering that are not limited to representation).

web applications (creating blogs, sites, games, teach-ins, hyperlinks, digital photos) help these young people style their engagements in ways that make the past their own.

I see heritage as a process of making and communicating meaning about the past, which is used in the present (L. Smith, 2006). I draw on the work of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett who suggests that heritage is experienced anew with each new mediation; in other words, heritage is (re-)experienced through its every performance or showing. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is attentive to the historicity of media forms through which heritage is mediated. About the development of new (digital) media forms for new audiences, she states that “the very forms and media, not just the content, need to be reinvented for they are powerful instruments with their own agency” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2000: 14).

This idea is crucial to how I try to understand what the role of digital media is in the ways the past is mediated for my respondents. I show that the use of certain web applications offers particular capacities for mediating the past. That is, web usage allows people to collate, curate, and present historical narratives, often for the niche audiences that they themselves shape through their digital (re)productions of the past. At the same time, items such as books, historical objects, and other physical items play necessary roles alongside and in conjunction with these web usages. I argue on the basis of my respondents’ (discursive) practices that this convergence of different media forms as well as the incorporation of various media forms within certain web uses is necessary in order to mediate the past into the present, as well as preserve it for the future. It also facilitates the formation of emergent modes of remembering, styled in ways appealing to the younger generation.

I add to work on Iranian diaspora remembering, but extend my focus beyond life histories around pre- and post-migrational experiences in the Iranian diaspora (for this, see Ghorashi, 2002; Sullivan, 2001). Within my focus on practices of remembering, I include my respondents’ own living memories, the older generation’s passed-on living memories, and an Iranian national memory (of a pre-national past). I focus on the perspective of an understudied generation of Iranian diaspora and their use of web applications in everyday

practices of engaging with the past. As mentioned, this draws on notions of heritage formation and the literature on digital heritage. But some argue for more attention for everyday web usage as part of remembering practices to supplement the current focus on the practices and epistemologies of institutions like museums and the role of the professionals working in them (Cameron & Kenderdine, 2007; Cameron, 2008; Kalay, Kvan, & Affleck, 2008; Malpas, 2008).

I have focused on three main practices of remembering that emerged as important in my findings: 1. Remembering Iranian and American national pasts in overlap with one another, 2. Remembering the ancient Persian (Achamaenid) period, 3. Remembering the modern pre-revolutionary past of Iran's 60s and 70s. This is how they weave together a past that both belongs to them and gives them a sense of belonging. In this way, engaging with the past is a facet of how being Iranian American is given meaning by this new generation. This is particularly interesting to investigate given the changing media environment that this generation is growing up in and the shifting, contemporary possibilities for (re)presenting the past.

Intersecting histories

Renewing Norooz in the US

As part of their Norooz celebration practices, many of my respondents shared photos and "status updates" on Facebook, as well as "tagging" (and being "tagged" by) friends and family members. Within this thoroughly social, yearly practice, the use of web applications increasingly became a part of the rituals around Norooz. Before looking more closely at the emergent practice of "sharing" these Norooz photographs via Facebook, I first sketch a more general picture of the meaning and role of Norooz and how it was practiced in my field site.

Norooz translates from Persian as New Day. It is the Persian New Year and a celebrated time of renewal. In LA, it is by far the most widely-enjoyed Iranian festivity, and is marked each year by celebrations on the first astronomical day of spring (or Spring Equinox), which takes place around March 21st. Malek's work on contemporary celebration of Norooz in the US describes the tradition as an "ancient Zoroastrian festival" marking "the arrival of spring and the end of the dark season,"⁷³ and signaling new beginnings. Norooz is celebrated by a great many Iranian Americans across religious and ethnic denominations and has gained the status of a truly inclusive celebration among Iranian diaspora, viewed, as Malek states, "as a cultural event that can serve a unifying purpose" (Malek, 2011: 393). Malek's study also expounds upon an important facet of how Iranian-ness is practiced in the US through celebrations around Norooz, namely, they are not only celebrations among Iranian Americans but also "performances" for non-Iranian (American) audiences. In LA, too, non-Iranian audiences are a key part of how practices around Norooz take shape – in the public domain but also in the ways internet is used around this celebration. The engagement with these audiences is something I come back to in my discussion of Norooz photo-sharing.

The Persian New Year has its origins in the Zoroastrian festival from the Achaemenid Empire of the fourth century BC, and is currently celebrated in Iran and a number of Middle Eastern/Central Asian countries. In LA, Eid-e Norooz and the celebratory practices that take place around it are the most prominently and publicly acknowledged celebration associated with the Iranian American population living in the city. And the annual ritual typically involves a great deal of preparation and celebration, both in public spaces and

⁷³ In the paper mentioned, Malek goes on to give background to the historical celebration, explaining that it is "traced variously to the Persian King Jamshid (of Firdawsi's *Shahnamah* [*Book of Kings*]) and to the Zoroastrian prophet Ahura Mazda [note: though some consider the prophet to be Zardosht, while Ahura Mazda is the god of good and Ahriman the god of bad], from whom many of the traditions and celebrations that commemorate Norooz arose. Because Norooz is the New Year celebrated not only by all Iranians but also by Tajiks, Afghans, Turks, and a large number of ethnic groups spread across the lands of the former Persian Empire, it is often viewed as a cultural event that can serve a unifying purpose. Beginning on the vernal equinox, during the thirteen days of Norooz, families and friends pay each other visits, exchange gifts, and spend as much time together as possible" (Malek, 2011, note inserted by Alinejad).

within homes, including *khooneh tekooni* (traditional spring cleaning undertaking in preparation for the new year), *Haft sin* (the ritual altar assembled in people's houses), *Chahar Shambe Soori* (which takes place on the Wednesday leading up to the new year in

which people jump over a fire at night – either in public spaces or on their back yards – in a purification rite), *Sizdah be dar* (an outdoor celebration that takes place in open spaces during the full day, usually public parks, and ceremoniously marks the thirteenth day of the new year, which is otherwise seen as a bad omen due to the number thirteen), and *Eid-e-Norooz* (the celebration that comes at the moment of Sale Tahvil, the turning of the new year).

In the US, although the relevant dates are not public holidays like in Iran, special television and radio programming at the New Year's commencement are consistently produced on Persian language broadcasts, wishing their viewers and listeners a happy new year. Sometimes these take place in the middle of the night, local time. In LA, *Eid-e Norooz* (the Norooz celebration) has become a common celebration. Festivities have taken on publicly visible proportions over the years. Apart from the longer-running *Sizeh be Dar* gatherings in large parks in Southern California with attendees often in the thousands, and at times parts of Westwood Boulevard are closed down to make room for the events, complete with a stage, audiences, and festive programming. University student groups put on events, and banners are hung throughout parts of the city by Iranian American organizations wishing a happy New Year to passers-by, while Norooz programming is adopted by some LA museums. The most notable of which is LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), whose yearly program since 2009 has been one of the largest Norooz events in the county, with sponsoring from Farhang Foundation – an influential local organization that funds a great deal of the Iranian cultural programming in LA.

The use of public, city spaces and county institutions means that the reception of these events by non-Iranian audiences is an increasingly important facet of the practice. And the ritual's entry into cultural programming brings with it an intention to educate broader audiences about the content and meaning of the tradition, as well as shed light on the

Iranian (American) populace who celebrates it. Norooz celebrations have taken on layered goals that implicate various publics, and this reflects something similar to what Malek argues of the Persian Day Parade, which is usually held in the month after Norooz in New York City.

Organizers of such events are motivated by goals of educating the American population about Iranian history and culture but also of passing an appreciated Iranian culture and identity on to the second generation, who have experienced post-9/11 hostility, while re-educating those first-generation Iranian Americans who have experienced assimilation. (Malek, 2011)

Malek argues that while processions or parades are not a traditional element of Iranian celebrations, these celebrations are repurposed as a performative public practice within the context of American tradition of the city parade (2011). While no such single public Norooz event stands out in LA in quite the same way as the street parade does in New York, the various bases for Norooz's recognition by different bodies has brought it a degree of public acknowledgement in LA that goes far beyond it being known simply within Iranian American family settings. The public celebration of Norooz in LA and the US becomes increasingly entwined into the local and national institutions, such that its cultural and political elements make it an institutional performance of Iranian American-ness.

The most significant instance of institutional recognition for Norooz came in the form of the national-level "Norooz Resolution."⁷⁴ The below excerpts are taken from the Norooz Resolution H.Res.267 that was introduced in 2009 by Democratic Representative Mike Honda, and passed in March 2010 by the House of Representatives. In the same month, the US Senate then passed a similar resolution (S.Res.463). This move was celebrated by the Iranian American organizations, National Iranian American Council (NIAC), and Public

⁷⁴ Another example from the local level of the city of LA was in 2011, when the City Council hosted a Norooz celebration and the Mayor of Los Angeles gave a speech at City Hall in Downtown LA for Norooz. This yearly local ceremony reflects the political sway of "the community" of Iranian Americans in LA. This was reported by the LA Times in March 2011

Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA). These organizations publicized their Washington representatives' involvement in the bill's progression. The bill's many Iranian American supporters had participated in the letter- and email-writing campaigns in the run-up to this event.

In 539 B.C., Cyrus the Great established one of the earliest charters on human rights, which abolished slavery and allowed for freedom of religion, and this marker in Iranian history has had significant impact on the respect for human rights that Iranian-Americans carry today...

The United States is a melting pot of ethnicities and religion[s] and Nowruz⁷⁵ contributes [to] the richness of American culture and is consistent with our founding principles of peace and prosperity for all.

In parallel to the successful national campaign for the Norooz Resolution, October 2009 saw the Norooz festival proclaimed by UNESCO as part of "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity." Within this framework, Norooz was designated as the "heritage of humanity," while in parallel the Resolution claimed Norooz as the heritage of people of Iranian descent currently living in the US. For nationally-oriented Iranian American organizations like PAAIA and NIAC, the UNESCO decision was used to additionally bolster the campaign for the Norooz Resolution.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ The different spellings of Norooz are chosen by different organs and individuals. In direct quotes I use the spelling of the source I use. In all other instances I use what I think is the closest English transliteration to the Farsi pronunciation and a commonly used version of the spelling i.e. Norooz. This is also one of the ways in which I saw the word being spelled. While UNESCO sanctions the use of various spellings, these also refer to diverse pronunciations of the word by various practitioners of this ritual across the region and not necessarily different spellings of the same word used by Iranians. The official and everyday spellings of Norooz remain a moderate source of contention, which I also noticed in the field. BM: Does this work? Could you not still take one spelling, acknowledging that there are different ones around?

⁷⁶ Norooz is practiced as part of interpersonal relationships, in private settings, and in groups of Iranian Americans with shared practices and understandings of the celebration. It harkens to an ancient past that predates both the Iranian nation-state and the introduction of Islam and is therefore a relatively successful unifier of Iranians of different political and religious denominations. This is an important part of why it was

The Norooz Resolution draws a discursive link between the ancient Persian King, the values of Iranians in the US today, and the “founding principles” of the US nation-state evident in “American culture.”⁷⁷ The adoption of the Norooz Resolution integrates an ancient Persian past into an American national past. This reflects what Baumann calls “encompassment,” one of the “grammars of alterity” he identifies (Baumann, 2004). He defines this as a hierarchical modality of inclusion in which self-styled others (in this case, Iranian immigrants) become part of the identity doing the encompassing of their difference (Americans).⁷⁸ In so doing, it subsumes Iranian-ness under the “melting-pot” of American nationhood in the present.⁷⁹

Iranian American organizations themselves also contribute to and reinforce this grammar of encompassment by increased orientation of institutionalized practices of Iranian American-ness towards American audiences. Ghorashi has pointed out a similar orientation with the Mehregan Festival in Orange County (Ghorashi, 2004). As she also suggests, this choice by the organization reflects a gain in collective minority recognition as well as absolving Iranians of links to “terrorism,” so as not to jeopardize being subsumed into American-ness as an Iranian subgroup. As Iranian-ness becomes subsumed into American-ness through utilizations of Norooz, Iranian American-ness also comes to enjoy greater and broader public recognition.⁸⁰

and is an effective node around which to mobilize support for collective recognition in the public realm for Iranians in the diaspora.

⁷⁷ Leaving aside the questions raised by the American nation encompassing a set of principles that are framed as predating the nation itself

⁷⁸ This is reminiscent of the recognition that other minority groups receive in designations such as Jewish Heritage month, Black history month, and other accreditations by the US government that acknowledge the lineage of particular minority groups in conjunction with the history of the American nation. The Resolution lends credence to American nationhood and its narrative of being consistently inclusive over time.

⁷⁹ All the terms quoted here are taken from the original text of the Resolution

<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/hres267/text>

⁸⁰ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes about heritage in the form of “festivals devoted to the traditions of a single ethnic group” and sponsored by various state, local, and federal agencies, as running the risk of promoting a “banality of difference,” neutralizing difference and rendering it inconsequential, while participating in a “discourse of pluralism and unity in diversity.” She describes “Americanization organizations” in the US of the early 20th century as using festivals in this way by design (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). It could be argued

The phenomenon of Norooz photo-sharing on Facebook is set in this broader context of the ritual celebration. I turn now to describing this phenomenon and discussing its relation to the wider setting. Many of my respondents' postings included photographs and home videos of themselves with family and others. But by and large these photos were specifically taken of the *haft sin*. Haft sin is a decorative and symbolic altar⁸¹ that is the central part of the celebration of Norooz and what much of the preparation of the affair goes into. A family's *Haft Sin* arrangement is typically situated in a central living area of the house during the weeks preceding the turn of the New Year.⁸² Like the rest of the Norooz seasonal celebrations, *haft sin* is a practice transported from Iran to the US via migration. And the posting of haft sin photos on Facebook and using social media platforms to wish family and friends happy New Year more seemed to be increasingly common.

For instance, Shideh, a student in her early 20s, used an "app" to share a photograph of a *sabzeh*⁸³ with a group of about 15 friends. *Sabzeh* is one of the most important of the objects arranged on the *haft sin* table.⁸⁴ The text accompanying Shideh's message sent with the app read: "I've sent you a سبزه [sabzeh] using عیدی [eidi] (the seasonal gift-giving app)! Accept this gift and send one back!" Aside from the app that allowed elements of the altar to be sent, *Haft sin* photos taken by people of their own *haft sin* tables were mostly posted via Facebook or emailed among friends and acquaintances. Aryana sent a *haft sin* photograph to a list of recipients during the run-up to the festive season, having adapted the photograph into a digital postcard that appeared as an attachment visible in her email. The text across the top of the photo read: "*Noroozetan Pirooz!*" ("Merry Norooz!")

that festivals like Mehregan and initiatives like the Norooz Resolution do as much to include difference as they do to render it a banal part of American nationhood.

⁸¹ *Haft Sin* is a ritual altar that is prepared for the celebration of the Persian new year. It consists of a table with seven (in Persian *haft* means seven) objects beginning with the Persian alphabet letter S (pronounced: *sin*).

⁸² The turn of the year occurs at the yearly spring equinox which takes place on a day in the late March.

⁸³ *Sabzeh* is a dish of wheat germ that is decoratively tied in ribbon, usually a red one, as in the case of Shideh's photograph

⁸⁴ It was not clear in all cases whether the photographs had been taken in one's own family house, one's place of residence, or whether their posters had taken these photos themselves at all or (re)used them from elsewhere on the internet.

transliterated in English script). At the bottom of the photo was a text in English wishing the recipient a happy new year, under which her name was signed. The photo signaled a new trend that Aryana kept up in following years. The photos with text incorporated into them replaced the previous year's purely text-based email message for the same occasion. The photographs added a visual element to the widespread, ritual well-wishing on and email Facebook that is typical of this period. And this visual addition fit well with conveying the visual components of the ornamental *haft sin* altars, each decorated with care and elaborately arranged to into colorful and attractive compositions.



Figure 3 Photograph posted by Atiya via Instagram application with caption:

“Happy New Year! Eid mobarak! مبارک نو سال”

It became apparent with the annual repetition that my respondents' practices of “tagging”, emailing, using a specific Norooz “app” on Facebook, or posting photographs to their profiles were becoming part of the Norooz celebration itself. Some even commented on Facebook about the experience – or anticipation of the experience – of seeing so many *haft sin* photographs in their Facebook “news feeds.” The *haft sin* altar is typically situated in my

respondents' parental houses, and often not something they, themselves, take part in assembling. However, this photo-posting practice was a way in which my second-generation respondents played an active part in perpetuating Norooz. The practice of sharing *haft sin* altar photos is by no means limited to the second generation or even to those living outside Iran. However, the role of the practice in this context brings with it particular implications.

For instance, investing preparation into personalized messages and imagery for circulation such as selecting a list of email recipients, preparing a personalized message and edited image, or crafting a posting for one's Facebook "timeline"/"wall," etc. bring a more personal side to the practice. This was most clearly evident with Atiya's *haft sin* table as shared via a photograph on the Instagram social media platform, and reposted to Facebook. Atiya's photograph is stylized with a filter from the Instagram program and features a *haft sin* that includes a framed photograph of her father. Atiya's father passed away since I first met her in 2009 and the portrait of him included in the celebratory Norooz altar was a way for her and her family members to remember him as part of the family during a time that is typically dedicated to being around loved ones. Placing photographs of family members on the Norooz altar was not uncommon among my respondents. In Atiya's case, the framed photo on the altar celebrates Norooz not only by remembering and perpetuating an ancient ritual, but also by remembering an absent family member whose presence is invoked in spirit.⁸⁵ Atiya's family's *haft sin* altar is customized with her father's photograph, but she both personalizes it and participates in its making herself through posting the Instagram photograph of the *haft sin* (also on Facebook).

⁸⁵ I also noticed that in Shiva's living room at her parents' house, the *haft sin* altar was arranged in front of an array of family photos of herself and her siblings. The practice of using photos of people in or around the *haft sin* display is a demonstration of family ties, especially in spite of the absence of some family members. This absence can be due to death in the case of Atiya's father, or because of migration and transnational families. Though these are diverse modes of remembering family members/relationships through Haft Sin, connecting to an ancient past becomes a practice through which the specific sociality of Iranian family relations is ceremoniously reinforced.

In addition to the personalization/customization of the photograph, this practice of posting photos of *haft sin* also translates them from the private space of people's homes, in which they are typically situated, to the format of a digital media platform. What would otherwise have been a sight only for those in the physical presence of the altar in the domestic setting is extended into a different social sphere when shared on Instagram and Facebook. In a way comparable to other public renditions of Norooz, this use of social media extends the practice to broader audiences of social contacts, including non-Iranian Americans. In line with this practice, *Turmeric and Saffron* is a popular food blog run by an Iranian American woman that, over the past few years, has provided basic explanations that are easily accessible to non-Iranian audiences while focusing on the culinary side of the seasonal celebration. The site also posts many haft sin photos each year that are continuous with the style of the photographs it posts of food on a regular basis. The blog's Norooz post was shared on Facebook by one of my respondents and reposted, for instance, by the Facebook page of another Iranian American digital publication.

I see the sharing of Norooz photos as reflecting claims to Iranian-ness through public celebration for a mixed audience. In this sense, they are similar to the Norooz Resolution and celebrations of Norooz as Iranian heritage. The American audience is present and important here as well, although it is defined less as local- and national-level policymakers, or Los Angelino museumgoers, but more in terms of blog followers/readers, Facebook friends, and email recipients. The practice parallels the dually intimate *and* public orientations that Norooz has more generally, and seems to merge them into a single practice. It is neither a private/intimate family setting, nor an official public campaign. The disparity is, however, that it reflects a more diffuse and unofficial modality of claiming difference. Norooz photo-sharing among my respondents reflects a much more effortless and circumstantial overlap between Iranian-ness and American-ness through ritual remembering. This performance neither seems to ask for Iranian-ness to be subsumed under American-ness, nor to be excluded or distinct from it. It seems to propose a grammar of inclusion that is different than the "encompassment" that official and formalized celebrations emphasize.

This web usage produces a particular mode of claiming difference. Digital objects have their own physical and aesthetic qualities that produce their “affectual tone” (Cameron, 2007). They are more than merely a referent that is “a servant to the ‘real.’” (ibid). They represent a facet of how much respondents become “do-ers” of heritage performance with the help of web applications.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, while digital objects appear to produce their own kind of reality,⁸⁷ *physical* objects still play a central role in the ways people seek engagement with the past. This web practice of photo-sharing reinforces the significance of the material practice of heritage ritual performance in families that is being digitally referenced. I also elaborate on this point later in the chapter. Here I have taken Norooz as a collective ritual practice of connecting with the past to describe how my second-generation respondents use internet to actively adapt, style, and extend this ritual to make it their own. I have shown how my respondents use internet to produce their own stylized adaptation of established versions of the past, while using it to claim difference in their own way. In the following I show how my respondents also do this with the Iranian and American national histories they learn about.

“Heritage learners”

At college, my respondents sometimes learn about an Iranian past that overlaps with the learning that happens within their families. Sarah is an undergraduate law student in her 20s who has graduated from college since I met her. As she explains in the following passage, learning about Norooz within the context of an elective college course was different than learning about it via her parents.

⁸⁶ As Smith argues, the “idea of performativity highlights the emotional and physical experience of heritage and stresses the idea of ‘doing’” (L. Smith, 2006). Seeing heritage as performance emphasizes how something becomes heritage through the process of being part of the doing of the performance. Hence, the way Norooz becomes heritage for the second generation also includes internet mediation.

⁸⁷ When I state that digital objects produce their own kind of reality I refer to Cameron’s reference to Gordon Graham’s 1999 notion of the “virtual” not being “a semblance of something else, but an alternative type of entity with properties similar and dissimilar to those with which it is contrasted” (Cameron, 2007).

I knew there was a Persian empire, but I didn't know details, I never considered the strategy and art of it. But now I studied it formally... I was telling my parents about the Persian Empire. Even things like Eid and Norooz. I finally considered the importance behind them.

Someone like Sarah learns about the Iranian past from a different vantage point than students without an Iranian background in the same class, but also differently than her fellow students who grew up in Iran. In American higher educational institutions, some students are defined as "heritage learners." These are students who learn either a language that their family members are native speakers of or a language that they have grown up with linguistic/cultural exposure to. Debates over "heritage languages" and "heritage learners" in the US education system have received much scholarly and policy attention. And there has been a shift within institutions towards curricula that cover the languages of the dominant immigrant populations in the US. A degree of exposure to the language is assumed among "heritage learners," while also acknowledging that the "heritage language" is their second language after English (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003).⁸⁸ The discourse around "heritage learners" is also framed in terms of the "right" to learn the language of one's forefathers alongside English, thus being a pedagogical term that also highlights certain students' distinctiveness in the American context.

I see the status of "heritage learner" as useful for the particular case of understanding the second generation, and more broadly applicable to those second-generation Iranian Americans who show an interest in learning about Iran within their formal institutions of higher learning in the US. I thus borrow the term and take it beyond the sphere of language-learning, applying it to learning about the Iranian past. For Sarah, as for many others I spoke with, the interest in learning about her Iranian background became most

⁸⁸ Teaching heritage languages in established American institutions of higher learning is different in terms of these debates from the teaching of heritage languages in dedicated language schools (often restricted to younger children of high school age and younger), which tend to be set up as private businesses. Regardless, the significant involvement of some of my respondents in the projects for setting up and developing language resources and teaching to younger heritage learners was something I observed as part of their (professional) service to "the community" but is not something I discuss in this book.

pronounced during their college years. The passage quoted above is how she spoke about a course she took early on in her program about the Achaemenid Empire (559-330 BC). The additional “importance” she now associates with the Persian Empire and Eid-e Norooz as a result of learning “the details” leaves an impression on her. This is an impression she subsequently conveys to her parents, extending her role from that of learner to teacher in the home. As Sarah’s comment suggests, the university as a new source of learning about Iran reshapes her relationship with the Iranian past. As Sarah’s example suggests, young members of the second generation are not only on the student/learning end of these academic settings. Some of my respondents became active curators of knowledge as they cross-cut formal educational and activist goals with the purpose of shaping heritage learning trajectories and agendas.

For instance, the annual “Iranian diaspora” conferences organized by Iranian American Alliances Across Borders (IAAB) devotes attention to pedagogical approaches that serve the second generation as “heritage learners.”⁸⁹ The 2012 panels on teaching at the conference held in LA included “Education in Diaspora: Pedagogical Questions and Possibilities” and included experts in immigrant education like Shirin Vossoughi, post-doctoral fellow at Stanford University, among the panelists. IAAB’s investment in tailoring pedagogical approaches to heritage learners is not limited to its members’/participants’ academic work, but is also applied in their projects such as their leadership camps for (pre-)college age groups (including Camp Ayandeh, Camp Javan). Former LA-based second-generation Iranian American, Dr. Vossoughi’s involvement with IAAB’s projects reflects these interlocking academic and applied roles in her involvement with directing and advising camp activities and curricula alongside and in conjunction with her academic pursuits. In 2011, Shirin wrote a piece for the Middle East current affairs analysis website, *Jadaliyya.com*, about the pedagogical philosophy behind Camp Ayandeh. In it, she discusses a number of goals behind the approach this camp adopts. One of them is the following:

⁸⁹ By and large the panel only used the term in the linguistic sense, largely because learning history and Iranian culture tends to be incorporated into language classes in the curricula being discussed at the conference

[L]earning about oneself and one's history is fundamentally connected to building solidarity with others. At Camp Ayandeh, we emphasize the world of diversity *within* the terms "Iranian" and "American," making explicit reference to the rich histories of communities of color in the United States. Many camp organizers are students of Ethnic and Women's Studies, borrowing and refashioning tools to make sense of our experiences as Iranian Americans(...) Many students express frustration at the negative portrayal of Muslim and Middle Eastern communities in the media. Almost all can relay a personal experience of discrimination, from teachers mockingly mispronouncing their names to being attacked and labeled as a "terrorist." Camp Ayandeh seeks to provide a safe space for critically analyzing and healing from these experiences.⁹⁰

This passage makes clear the ways history learning is approached as part of being Iranian American. History is put to use in the context of a summer leadership camp by and large made up of second-generation high school students, and run by second-generation college and graduate students. Its purpose is countering experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination that Iranian American students are said to face. And this goal is furthered by forging connections to groups with different but parallel immigrant histories in the US; that is, "building solidarity" with "communities of color in the US." Emphasizing the connections that cross Iranian and other immigrant experiences is also something Dr. Neda Maghbouleh pleads for. Neda is also a second-generation Iranian American who spent a significant part of her life in Southern California. Her dissertation in sociology, completed at the University of California Santa Barbara, draws, in part, on fieldwork conducted at Camp Ayandeh. In her work, she calls for further contextualizing and historicizing the experiences of Iranian Americans within the broader context of US immigration. The impetus to connect with the other immigrant histories in America thus emerges as an important part of being Iranian American. But in order to make this connection, some feel it is necessary to first tell and

⁹⁰ Vossoughi, Shirin, "Inhabiting the Possible: Pedagogy and Solidarity at Camp Ayandeh," (accessed 1/12/14)

record the stories of Iranian Americans about their own experiences. Some people see a lack in the extent to which such stories have been collected and seek to remedy it.

Projects like IAAB's Oral History Initiative, set up as a way to document the wide range of Iranian American migration experiences through storytelling, is a way in which personal or family histories are seen as filling the gaps in knowledge about Iranian Americans' presence in the US over time. This remembering is used as a way to establish Iranian Americans as an immigrant group and build a sense of collective presence. To this end, IAAB's 2012 Diaspora Conference also had a panel on "the various oral, visual, and multimedia histories being collected by Iranian diaspora." The Oral Histories Initiative also uses digital audio visual recordings of interviews and statements as part of the project. The use of digital media as part of storytelling about immigrant experiences is perhaps most evident in the 2013 release of Iran Ardalan's *The Persian Square*, an e-book for iPad. Ardalan's "digital book" uses text, music, audio, and video material "to illustrate the rich history that Americans and Iranians share together." Working collaboratively with other authors and other Iranian American contributors, including those from the second generation, Ardalan pieces together a book designed as a multimedia collage of snippets touching on the various artistic, journalistic, and scientific, work as well as public service and other efforts of Iranian Americans. It also captures historical information, both pivotal and seemingly trivial, that marks the intersections between Iranian and American people and "culture."

This project further illustrates the interest in telling and recording what are largely considered under-documented histories by the most active and invested of my respondents. These projects call for recognition and self-knowledge in the present, suggesting that "[t]he contents, interpretations and representations of the [past as a] resource are selected according to the demands of the present" (Graham & Howard, 2012: 2). In this case, those demands implicitly revolve around inclusion. In an NPR radio interview, Ardalan expressly states that an important purpose of the book -- in line with the other initiatives mentioned -- is to help young people overcome the shame or

embarrassment they have about being Iranian American and to build connections with one another. Creating a collaborative record of who Iranian Americans are is part of shaping the contents and interpretations of the past in order to use it as a resource for establishing young Iranian Americans as part of the history of the US, and particularly LA. The title of Ardalan's book testifies to LA's importance with its reference to the Westwood intersection's common name, "Persian Square"⁹¹ (a play on the Downtown Pershing Square), where the oldest Iranian business in the city is located. The commemoration of people, sites, and their stories establishes an Iranian immigrant past in the US to draw upon through a digital multimedia product.

This kind of project can be seen as a form of "community co-creation," to use Russo and Watkins' term (2007). The authors see "community co-creation" as coming about when there is a shift from professional curators working with digital media in cultural institutions that tell stories about communities, toward community members telling their own stories through digital media. According to them, this shift also marks change in "the audience experience from cultural consumption to cultural production" (2007: 152). This takes place through the development of "new literacies" that require a range of interactive participation (Russo & Watkins, 2007). In this case, key (second generation) Iranian American actors are at the forefront of producing digital renditions of Iranian American history and thus partaking in "community co-creation." They take up the role of cultural curators on their own behalf.⁹²

Personal histories are evidently an important vehicle for documenting diasporic pasts. But they are not alone. A very different but equally important example of documenting the past

⁹¹ See also mention of "Persian Square" in Chapter 1.

⁹² Indeed, in addition to taking up the role of cultural curators on their own behalf, other examples have shown how they then seek out institutional support for recognition and access to wider audiences. In this way, they essentially do what Russo and Watkins describe and advocate, but then in the opposite order. This is because of the general experience that cultural institutions were/are not playing an active role in telling their stories in the absence of their self-advocacy through their own story-telling. A repeated phrase I heard was, "if we don't tell our own stories, who will tell them for us?"

that also emerged in recent years is Encyclopædia Iranica⁹³. Iranica is a project of Dr. Ehsan Yarshater, director of the Center for Iranian Studies at Columbia University. It receives funding from the National Endowment for Humanities, and includes work from a wide range of academic disciplines studying “Persian life and culture.” The project is largely concerned with the study of the past, and it describes itself in the following way:

The Encyclopædia Iranica is a comprehensive research tool dedicated to the study of Iranian civilization in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent.

The project was widely supported among Iranian Americans, including many of my respondents. It represented an attempt to create a comprehensive and authoritative academic document produced with the ambitious aim of encompassing Iranian culture and history in as much of its entirety as possible, enlisting the work of a wide range of experienced scholars from relevant areas.

Every four months, a new fascicle, and every 18 months, a new volume of the encyclopedia is published. In this way, Iranica goes through the alphabet, printing volume by volume. The project was started in the early 70s by Yarshater, and in the early 80s the first fascicle was printed. In 2011, when Iranica was covered by the *New York Times*, Aryana wrote about Iranica on her blog, describing it as “an encyclopedia of all things Iranian.” But as Aryana also points out, it is not only a printed encyclopedia. Iranica is interesting because it also publishes the original articles on the Encyclopædia Iranica website. The website was started in 1996 at iranica.com, but since then the site’s features and functions have been enhanced to resemble less of an encyclopedic catalogue with pdf files of the entries, and more of an accessible, well-designed, and typical website. To this end, it was moved to iranicaonline.com, search and browsing functions were enhanced, featured articles were added to the homepage, a Facebook page was created, and content was added to the website that was not included in the printed version. The site also launched a

⁹³ Encyclopædia Iranica <http://www.iranicaonline.org/> (accessed 1/12/14).

crowdsourcing initiative to repair the broken links (hyperlinks that do not/no longer) work, and the Facebook page is set up to encourage interactive usage through commenting, sharing, etc. The focus of the project, therefore, shifted over time toward making the content accessible via the website in a conventional and navigable web format, and making use of the interactive affordances of social media. Interestingly, however, the paper version is still printed, even though this is done at a financial loss. The website offers this explanation for the changing relationship between the two arms of the project.

During the last decade, the project's priorities have moved from the publication of a printed encyclopedia to the development of the free online database. The print edition, however, is being continued since the long-term preservation of digitally born contents remains a challenge.

While web usage affords important means of active participation and reaching audiences for the scholarly material, the “long-term preservation” is done through the printed book volumes that encyclopedias remain known for. Through embedded hyperlinks via blogs and websites, some of my respondents cover and draw positive attention to the Iranica project, as well as integrate its information into their own projects. For instance, the site of Ajam Media Collective, a site set up by second generation Iranian Americans, links to Iranica on its homepage via the picture of a painted Persian miniature depicting two men in the right side column. It is a link to the Iranica entry “Homosexuality in Persian Literature,” an entry that highlights the gap between the treatment of homosexuality in Islamic law, and in the Persian poetry including that of the Islamic mystics. The same use of the printed historical material is not possible in the same way with the physical, bound and printed version of the encyclopedia. I discuss the mission and content of Ajam Media Collective’s website further in the following section. For now, this example illustrates how using the knowledge resources of a comprehensive, English language scholarly canon on Iran such as Iranica does not sit at odds with the drive toward documenting informal personal histories or more activist awareness-raising about certain Iranian pasts by my second-generation

respondents. In fact, both seem to mobilize the past as a (re)source for self-knowledge as (diaspora) Iranians.

The past is used to claim recognition via a combination of formal educational curricula and scholarly authorities, and more emotionally-informed and collectively-oriented personal histories. Web usage allows information design and access that can be used in my respondents' own productions, for instance, through web-linking to Encyclopædia Iranica, via a website produced by some of my respondents. This illustrates how "history teaching and heritage education – in the fullest sense – are then complementary activities" (Hamer, 2005: 168). Web applications become implicated in these activities as information about the past is styled for and by second-generation members, in ways that contribute to the endeavor for engaging with the past as a path to self-knowledge.⁹⁴

Previous research has argued that second-generation youth primarily find flaws with their academic learning, for instance, because it includes "little information on critical Iranian historical events" including coverage of the Persian Empire (Daha, 2011: 559). Daha characterizes the learning in "Persian clubs" or other students groups and organizations as a response to a "lack of curricular inclusion" that second generation Iranian Americans note (2011).⁹⁵ The second-generation students I spoke with were college students and not in high school like Daha's respondents. Their student organization activities and encounters with college curricula reflect enlightening experiences during their college education periods regarding their relationships to Iranian history, politics, and language.

⁹⁴ In the context of digital learning, the role of digital media in the lives of youth has been oriented understood in terms of children -- as learners, in the home and in school (Livingstone; Buckingham; Buckingham and Scanlon). In the cases and settings I discuss in this section, learners are not easily distinguished from teachers. This gives the notion of "interactivity" – often considered important if not key for learning with the help of digital media (see Buckingham & Scanlon, 2005) – a new dimension. Though valuable, work on second-generation migrant learning with the use of digital media has also focused on children rather than second-generation adults (e.g. Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011). Yet importantly it argues for migrant youths' digital learning to be understood in conjunction with their identity formation and the variety of forms of digital media usage through which this takes place. The focus on children as learners rather than teachers means less attention is paid to the ways second-generation young adults take up and use digital media elaborately (and sometimes professionally) to teach and educate their younger counterparts.

⁹⁵ Indeed, some of my respondents advocate further broadening of Middle Eastern studies and Iranian Studies university curricula.

Their learning in Iranian student clubs often utilized literature from the curriculum and sometimes involved some of their more interested Iranian professors. While appeals among the most involved students (including graduate students) for greater coverage of Iran and Iranian diaspora in university curricula, there was more of a synthesis between the existing curricula and the activities of Iranian student organizations. Hence, in contrast with Doha's account, less of an opposition, and more of a synthesis was, evident between academic learning and learning as part of a more explicitly identity politics-driven project. In what follows, I go on to bring together the points made so far in this section about the possibilities and limitations of web applications for mobilizing the past for these members of the second generation.

Securing the past through socially (inter)active remembering

My respondents are fascinated and affectively invested in learning and teaching about intersecting Iranian and American pasts. These include a casual yet ritualized performance of Iranian American-ness on one's own terms and a past that aligns their status as immigrant ethnic minorities with the histories of other minority groups in the US. From this it is evident that "[h]eritage is not only a social and cultural resource or process, but also a political one through which a range of struggles are negotiated" (L. Smith, 2006). They are actively involved in selecting what past is worthy of their engagement, and at times that means challenging dominant systems of remembering/forgetting.

These struggles and negotiations over the past are pivotal to processes of self-making. This reflects Stuart Hall's the claim that "[i]dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (1996). But it also seems to go further, illustrating the mutual construction of the past and selves through practices of remembering. As Lowenthal states, "as we remake it, the past remakes us" (Lowenthal, 1985: xxv). This points to how remembering not only allows people to use the past as a resource for forming selves but, indeed, remake it. Through their projects of

documentation, critical engagement, and curation, members of the second generation appear to be doing precisely that.

While my respondents often present what they do as passive preservation, what they do nevertheless also serves to demarcate clear boundaries to Iranian-ness – to remake it in a certain way. Furthermore, as the sustained significance of the Iranica printed volumes and Norooz physical altars show, mediation of the past is bound to the power and aesthetics of certain physical forms and institutions. Relying on scholarship, ritual, and documentation, practices of remembering conjure up an objectified and comprehensive Iranian-ness that can be preserved against change or degradation over time. And physical things are thought to carry on the past in an apparently more secure way.

The use of web applications, though, is not simply to reinforce the role of physical objects. Its affordances in this context also include helping to (re)inscribe Iranian American cultural heritage with public significance in the American context, both officially and on an interpersonal level among social contacts. It also allows for customization of ritual practices like *haft sin*, and encourages independent understanding and sense-making in the cases of creative learning and teaching. These practices involve styling the past into formats that are appealing and relevant to my respondents, and that breed forms of sociality into which they feel included. They style unique spaces for collective learning and ritual remembering, while interactively and socially making use of internet and various digital media forms in doing so. Hence, although notions of what constitutes the Iranian past are defined, bounded, objectified, and preserved (Naficy, 1993) by some of these members of the second generation, it is more based in a diasporic positioning (Ghorashi, 2004; Ghorashi, 2002) than an unchanging link to a distant and single Iranian homeland. In the following section I discuss the use of the ancient and modern past of Persia and Iran, with a focus on how this is being explicitly reframed by my respondents with the help of their web use.

Re-politicizing Persia

Perspolis Tablets

The dispute over the Perspolis Fortification Tablets case is long-running, convoluted, and politically charged. On the basis of archaeological evidence, Perspolis has been identified as the ceremonial capital of the Acheamenid Empire, with UNESCO declaring the citadel of Perspolis a World Heritage site in January 1979.⁹⁶ The palaces at this site were looted and burned by Alexander the Great in 330 BC as he invaded and defeated the ancient Persian Empire,⁹⁷ meaning that much of the capital could not be preserved. In the early 1930s, American researchers excavated remnants of the documents in this ancient civilization's administrative archives. These have since been kept primarily at the University of Chicago, Maryland⁹⁸. The major archaeological significance of the Tablets is that until their discovery, understanding of the Achamaenid empire had relied on the documentation of other civilizations (Roman and Greek), rather than its own.

The physical preservation of the artifacts came under threat during a battle against selling the tablets to private owners, which pushed the issue into public debate for many Iranian Americans. The issue arose when a US law was passed in the late 1990s to allow American victims of terrorism restitution in US courts. Since then, American victims of a Hamas-claimed suicide bombing in Jerusalem that took place 1997, sued the Iranian government in a Washington D.C. court in 2003, and won upward of 400 million dollars in damages (in addition to millions in punitive damages) in the case, Rubin versus Iran. This was won on the grounds that Iran is designated by the US as a “state sponsor of terrorism,” and thus shares responsibility for the attack.⁹⁹ It was a legal precedent.

⁹⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/114> (accessed 29/14/14)

⁹⁷ Encyclopaedia Iranica, <http://www.iranica.com/articles/persepolis> (accessed 29/11/14)

⁹⁸The Oriental Institute, The University of Chicago, “Persepolis Fortification Tablets,” <http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/pubs/catalog/oip/oip92.html> (accessed 29/11/14)

⁹⁹In addition, NIAC reports that another American lawyer has trying to seize the Persepolis collection and other Iranian assets to compensate more than 150 families of 241 U.S. service members killed in a suicide

Unable to collect their payment from the Iranian government, however, the plaintiff's lawyers demanded that the Fortification Tablets, in possession of American institutions, be sold on the open market with the proceeds going to their clients.¹⁰⁰ They have also sued the University of Chicago in order to be able to confiscate the artifacts for sale. Harvard University and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) have also become embroiled in the issue alongside the University of Chicago. In 2011, an appeals court rejected the plaintiff's claims to seize the artifacts from the University of Chicago on the basis of the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act of 1975 that makes the objects immune to seizure because they are used for non-commercial purposes.¹⁰¹

In response to the possible transfer of the Tablets (whether in line with the plaintiffs' request or the Iranian government's possible intervention to reclaim the tablets), the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, with the help of the University of Southern California (USC), undertook an extensive project of digitally documenting the pieces. This project also gained repeated funding from PARS Community Foundation. The project means adding the Tablets to the Online Heritage Research Environment (OHRE) of the University of Chicago.¹⁰² The Persepolis Fortification archive project has used electronic media to compile almost two and a half thousand high resolution digital images of the Fortification tablets and other documents within a data structure for recording, linking,

bombing of a Marines barracks in Beirut in 1983. The families hope to collect a \$2.6 billion default judgment against Iran, which has been blamed for supporting the militant group, Hezbollah, believed responsible for the Beirut attack.

¹⁰⁰Story as reported by Associated Press in February 2009. The progression of the ongoing developments around the Persepolis Archive can be followed on the following blog that has been set up by the official Project at Chicago. Persepolis Fortification Archive <http://persepolistablets.blogspot.nl/> (accessed, 29/11/14)

¹⁰¹The connection between ancient Persia and the modern nation state of Iran has been made somewhat straightforward among the Iranians in this part of the diaspora, although the boundaries of the various eras of the Persian Empire did not resemble those the present-day Iran, but included several of Iran's neighboring nation states. Perhaps ironically, given the details of this case, the period of the Persian Empire that these ancient archives documented included the area now known as Israel.

¹⁰² University of Chicago News, "Technology brings new insights to ancient languages," http://news.uchicago.edu/news.php?asset_id=1732 (accessed 29/11/14)

analyzing, and presenting the documents and images.¹⁰³ The project's agreements for cooperation with the University of Southern California, UCLA, and Collège de France means the data will be distributed through at least three other online sources.¹⁰⁴

A few Iranian American organizations made public efforts to draw attention to the case along with the participation of Iranologists at key American academic institutions. On their website set up as part of the campaign to protect the artifacts, NIAC publicly stated that, "the Persepolis Tablets are a part of our rich heritage that should continue to be shared at museums and universities." Parsa Community Foundation, from which NIAC receives significant funding, is another prominent Iranian American organization supporting the preservation of the tablets at Chicago. The director of the Perspolis Fortification Archive expressed gratitude for Parsa's support when said the following in a public video address as part of the campaign the organization launched around the Tablets.

[I]t is absolutely wonderful that PARSA Community Foundation has been able to mobilize so much support for the Oriental Institute's Persepolis Fortification Archive project and has used it towards not only Iranian-Americans but for the heritage of all Iranians worldwide...¹⁰⁵

Both Parsa and NIAC¹⁰⁶ posted online materials concerning the case and the campaign on their website including video, news articles, additional documents, and links to email campaigns to raise awareness among members, subscribers, and the general public. Events have been organized and experts and scholars from relevant fields have helped establish the significance of preservation and, in turn, the legitimate possession of the objects by American academic institutions. Since the online documentation project was initiated,

¹⁰³ Online Cultural Heritage Research Environment, http://ochre.lib.uchicago.edu/PFA_Online/ (accessed 29/11/14)

¹⁰⁴ The Oriental Institute, The University of Chicago, "Persepolis Fortification Archive," <http://oi.uchicago.edu/research/projects/pfa/> (accessed 29/11/14)

¹⁰⁵ See link for textual transcript of the video on the Parsa site

¹⁰⁶ In addition, UK-based Iran Heritage Foundation also worked with the Persepolis Fortification Archive project. Parsa Community Foundation, "Hitting \$1,000,000 Grant Mark," <http://www.parsacf.org/Page/228>, (accessed 29/11/14)

defenders have launched media campaigns alongside appeals to the President Obama.¹⁰⁷ In addition, NIAC launched the “Perspolis Center,” which was described as

[A]n online resource that will not only serve as a clearinghouse for background information about the Persepolis Tablets but will also provide a direct connection between NIAC and members with the latest updates on our efforts, new opportunities for members to mobilize, tools for contacting elected representatives, and profiles of endangered collections.¹⁰⁸

The work on the OHRE project can be seen as an urgent effort to digitally document the pieces thoroughly before the threat of seizure becomes a reality. This is meant to ensure that study and digital access to the artifacts can continue regardless of the objects’ whereabouts. However, the emphasis of the campaign NIAC has embarked on has consistently been to defend the university’s possession and preservation of the objects, regardless of the digital documentation possibilities. For NIAC and supporters of the campaign, this dispute about the physical preservation, ownership, and public access to the historical objects revolves around the possession and whereabouts of the material objects and not the digitally-molded and internet-accessible replicas.

While the work of the OHRE at the University of Chicago continues, the public campaign utilizes internet among other media to emphasize the importance of preservation to the public and members of the organizations in question. Through email notifications and the launch of an online resource like the “Perspolis Center” internet is utilized to emphasize the

¹⁰⁷ NIAC’s President, Trita Parsi, urged Barack Obama to enact the commitment to diplomacy with the Middle East that he made the beginning of his term -- and to avoid the Iranian government’s retaliation and escalation of the matter -- by issuing an executive order to stop this seizure. Likewise President Obama has been publicly urged by Parsi to put into action the “respect” he professed having for Iranian cultural heritage in his Presidential address to the Iranian people during Persian New Year celebrations and the respect he expressed for “Persian civilization” in an interview for Arabic news service Al-Hurra. NIAC additionally launched a legislative campaign to press US Congress to close a legal loophole that allowed for the sale of the artefacts under US law (see National Iranian American Council, **“Inside Washington: NIAC’s Battle to Save the Persepolis Tablets”**

<http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6203> (accessed 29/11/14)).

¹⁰⁸ (<http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6203>).

urgency of preservation and ownership and the linked threats of improper valuation and physical degradation of the objects were they to be translated purely to their monetary value. The use of websites and social media reflects how some of my respondents entered the picture with their own actions around this issue. Some of them worked together to organize a meeting at the UCLA campus back in 2007, when the University of Chicago and others were in the process of resisting the sale of the objects.¹⁰⁹

A Facebook group was set up for the mobilization and Beeta and Pouneh were made “hosts” thereof along with about 15 other mostly Iranian American students. The initiative had the intent of ensuring the campaign’s success, and the “Event” page also became a space for some comments and interaction. Like the broader campaign, statements by students repeatedly invoked the importance of cultural preservation. They also invoked the imagined “future generations” that had been used more widely in the campaign. The latter were those for whom the objects were ostensibly being preserved.

¹⁰⁹ The website of the Oriental Institute at Chicago university has a weblog set up to update about the events surrounding the legal fate and scholarly significance of the artefacts. See <http://persepolistablets.blogspot.nl/> for the most updated information, including the latest ruling in the Rubin vs. Iran case in which an Illinois judge denied the right to the plaintiffs to seek reparations from the Hamas attack (mentioned earlier) through the auctioning of the Persepolis Tablets in March 2014.



Figure 4 Event Page of “Iranian Persepolis Tablets and Controversy with Israel” created in 2007

The campaign’s emphasis on maintaining the University of Chicago’s possession of the artifacts was intended not to challenge official Iranian ownership of the artifacts. In fact, former Iranian President, Mohammad Khatami’s visit to Chicago’s Oriental Institute in 2006, where the artifacts are kept, publicly underlined this point.¹¹⁰ In line with the campaign, the emphasis was on the objects as cultural heritage rightfully belonging to Iranian Americans, Iranians worldwide, and to a globally defied public¹¹¹ rather than US or

¹¹⁰ News coverage of Khatami’s visit from Payvand news <http://www.payvand.com/news/06/sep/1055.html>

¹¹¹ According to updates concerning the court cases underway, it appears that part of the legal strategy is also to ascertain that the pieces are not and were never property of the Islamic Republic and therefore it is inaccurate to treat them as though they were property being confiscated from the Islamic Republic of Iran. See official Project’s blog entry citing the court proceedings that indicating that “Iran itself has not articulated any claim to the property in question” <http://persepolistablets.blogspot.nl/2012/07/news-illinois-district-court-gets-case.html>. Nevertheless, in 2004, a number of the artefacts were returned to Iran, though still

Iranian governments, states, or private parties. For example, as one of the second generation Iranian Americans student organizers, Combiz, states under the event's description:

These tablets... should not be auctioned off to pay for victims of terror in Israel. Governments come and go; these tablets have been around for thousands of years. They belong to the people of Iran

Their importance as part of global heritage and civilization was invoked with reference to the UNESCO designation of Persepolis as a protected material site. And the familiarity and significance of Perspolis to Iranians, including in the diaspora, existing strongly long before this issue arose, was mobilized in support of protective intervention. Another commenter on the page states:

[T]he artifacts belong to the Iranian people and not the Government. The USA courts and Israeli government has no rights over the artifacts as they belong to the world as well.

The student commenters and organizers of the event used this web platform – in line with the way the broader campaign made use of multiple web applications -- to emphasize the importance of the objects in question. Through taking this stance, members of the second generation introduce their stake in the preservation of the tablets, both as a national good, and a global one. The mobilization of heritage discourses frees the heritage objects from being designated simply as the property of the Iranian government – rather, this assumption is what the plaintiff's case is built around. Heritage discourses are used to help the objects transcend their status as Iranian government or state property. For the participating students, this campaign involves social media as a means of publicizing information in a narrative about the objects. The example of the Perspolis Tablets confirms

leaving thousands remaining in the US for study purposes. 2004 was also when the Rubin family began their lawsuit against the Islamic Republic of Iran in an American court.

a sustained primacy of physical objects over their digital counterparts in an instance where the physical objects in question are not only historical objects but are also under a specific threat to their preservation. The role of internet and digital media for in my respondents consist of reinforcing the material status of the physical objects through the (digitally-mediated) cross-generational campaign to preserve them.

Malpas has argued that “the web and the digital technologies associated with it” remove the significance of physical objects when they are represented digitally because, as he argues, these objects are taken out of place.

This capacity to release things, and not only works of art, from the places in which they are is perhaps the key element in the transformative power of modern communication and information technologies – although it is equally crucial to older technologies also, the printing press being an excellent example. The web, and the digital technologies associated with it, re-present the most radical instantiation of this capacity – here, place no longer seems to have any significance at all and has instead been replaced by a network of equally accessible locations within a single ‘space’ (Malpas, 2007: 21).

The campaign I described seeks to release the objects from their status as property of the Islamic Republic i.e. status that originally made them a target of appropriation by the plaintiffs in the court case. However, while web usage is involved in this reframing project, it is equally involved in the parts of a nationally-bound campaign in the US dedicated to preserving the heritage objects, to reinforcing the importance of where they physically are and who is responsible for their physical preservation. Hence, while certain applications are important in disseminating the key narrative to release the objects from their threatened status, others are used to help maintain the significance of the materiality of the objects. This enforces the importance of the institutional ownership, location, and physical condition of the objects. The objects’ materiality prevents them from being released from “the places in which they are.”

As Russo and Watkins suggest, any instance of media usage can only go so far. As they suggest of digital media and heritage, mediation is about people's strategies for achieving an unmediated authentic experience (Russo & Watkins, 2007).¹¹² Achieving this experience – according to those involved in this campaign – apparently relies on the artifacts in their physical form. My respondents develop a relationship with the ancient Iranian past within a context where various web applications and their particular affordance are available to them. Their choices in the case discussed reflect an investment in historical objects. They also develop this relationship with the past within a context where exiled loyalists set themselves against the Islamic authority of Iran's current leaders with invocations of a pre-Islamic national past that symbolizes stark political opposition to the Islamic regime. Within this context my respondents seek to position themselves with relation to various actors around them. In the following I move on to discuss how some of the same young people involved in this event organize and express themselves against particular ways of drawing the Persian Empire for nationalist purposes.

Reframing the ancient past

A speaking event was held at the University of Irvine in May, 2009. The speaker was the eldest son of the late Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.¹¹³ During the question-and-answer section of the program, an older gentleman near the front of the auditorium asked, "through history we have been peaceful people. How, through your leadership, can we show our culture to the world?" The would-be monarch responded by stating: "our current behavior should carry on that heritage and pride to the second generation." The brief incident was interesting for what it clarified about the goal of transmitting national "pride" to the second generation at events like this one, namely, that the second generation are bestowed with

¹¹² See also the research program on *Heritage Dynamics: Politics of Authentication and Aesthetics of Persuasion in Brazil, Ghana, South Africa and the Netherlands*, which was based primarily at the cultural anthropology department of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, funded by the Dutch Scientific Organization (NWO) and concluded in November 2013. The program highlighted the role of "experiences" in allowing heritage to become claimed and felt as a "real" and essential basis for constructed socio-cultural identities.

¹¹³ Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was the last Shah of Iran, taking the throne after his father in September 1941, and ruled until 1979 when he was overthrown by the Islamic Revolution.

the role of carrying on and presenting positive attributes to Iranian-ness to the world based on a positive “history.” Audience members like the older gentleman in the audience and other older members of the first generation were evidently loyalists to the Pahlavi royal family. There were also many second-generation audience members attending the event. Presumably, many of them were students of the University of Irvine, born after the fall from power of the Pahlavi regime and the family’s subsequent exile in the US, but present in large numbers to hear the speech.

As we exited the hall, Farhang, a young man who was an active member of Iranian American student organizing and involved with other Iranian American events, told me that he had enjoyed Pahlavi’s speech very much and applauded the man’s diplomatic tone. To Farhang, Pahlavi was a figure that exuded the civil level-headedness that was missing from current Iranian heads of state. As we moved out of the hall, a young woman standing nearby told her friend a story from earlier in the day when she had accidentally come across Pahlavi in street. She animatedly described her excited reaction upon sighting him, describing the experience with the gushing energy of someone who had come across famous celebrity they admire.

The event as a whole was swathed in an air of ceremony and celebrity around the former royal family, over 30 years on from the establishment of the republic. Despite being deposed from royalty, the family had apparently not lost its national symbolic status. And the second generation’s coming of age does not necessarily seem to pose a threat to this status. Nevertheless, an important debate that preoccupied many of my respondents concerned the contemporary remnants of the Pahlavi Dynasty’s glorification of the Persian Empire. The public use of the ancient Persian past by Iranians in the US has not been limited to loyalists to the Shah. Ancient Persia is also used in the diaspora as a way of celebrating Iranian nationhood while avoiding invoking the Islamic Republic. Malek’s work has dealt with this tendency in cultural productions among Iranian American groups describing public Iranian American events as reflecting a focus on:

[T]he Iranian homeland and its ancient pre-Islamic history (part of a strong nationalist sentiment that echoes Pahlavi-era rhetoric), which serves to minimize the privileging of internal ethnic difference in the face of a favored Iranian identity. (Malek, 2011: 389).

On the one hand, pre-Islamic history is used to emphasize national unity in the diaspora. And on the other, this particular ancient symbolism also summons a particular notion of nationhood that many of my respondents associate with narratives of national unification from the Pahlavi era. Student organizer, Pouneh, was a vocal critic of the legacy of glorifying an ancient Persian past by the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's predecessors, as well as those she claimed were influenced by these narratives in her environment.

It's important to educate young Iranian Americans about all parts of Iranian history. Not just romanticizing the ancient Achamaenid period, but all of it. They are all important to learn about. And it's not just about talking about the pride you take in your history so you can feel good about yourself. You have to learn the good with the bad. Not just look at the good things so you can be proud...I feel like people use the Achamaenid period as a perfect period. Reza Shah brought that back in Iran. He brought back how great of a civilization the Persian Empire was. But today they definitely romanticize the idea of what it was back then. Sure, there are impressive things that I learn when I study the history... but whether or not it's good or bad you should be proud of what your country has gone through to come to where it is today.

Pouneh felt invested in how young Iranian Americans learn about the Iranian past. Her approach does not eschew a notion of national pride, but positions her against the romanticization of a "perfect" national past within a particular national ideology. The emphasis is on learning comprehensively and Pouneh contended with selections of the past that reinforce the national ideology she is critical of, but which she saw as dominant in her surroundings. Instead, together with Beeta, she took the initiative of self-styling quasi-academic spaces for learning within the university environment to educate themselves and

their peers about the Iranian past. This approach was put into practice on the occasion of a meeting the two put together at the university. On a summer's afternoon, we filed into the air-conditioned classroom on campus and sat at our desks, facing the blackboard on the front wall. Almost all of those present already knew one another, either as friends or fellow members of the Iranian student group or both. We had been invited via a Facebook event invitation from the two coordinators.

We were given photocopied handouts with timelines and lists of facts as Pouneh explained from the front of the room that she had gathered the printed information from a combination of previous course materials and internet searches. We looked at our handout sheets with dates spanning from ancient history of the Persian dynasties to modern history of the Iranian nation state. After Pouneh's introductory lecture, we were invited to gather on the carpeted floor in the center of the room to watch an online video from Pouneh's laptop. It was a documentary piece from the National Geographic channel about modern Iranian history, focusing mainly on the years from the early 1900s to the present day.

Some of the students stretched out on the floor, some leaning on others. Others sat cross-legged on the floor or on top of desks, legs dangling. Pouneh scrolled through the video here and there, at one point stopping to ask the group whether they were interested to continue watching. We were. A whispered comment from time to time between the participants set the informal mood as we watched the luminous screen in the darkness of the classroom, listening to the dry, detached tone of the narrator's voice in the light of the computer screen. The classroom, the location, the course materials, and the structure of the meeting (lecture, then discussion) which, somewhat mimicking a college class, all lent a certain academic credence to the exercise. Yet, the informality and intimacy of the relationships between the students shone through in their interactions.

The critical positioning with respect to secular (anti-Islamic) nationalist narratives about the ancient Persian past that Beeta and Pouneh express is important. This is evident in Beeta's use of internet as one of the editors and founders of Ajam Media Collective. One piece, written by her and the other editors and posted to the Ajam website, was very

interesting in this regard. It was entitled *Ferdowsi's Legacy: Examining Persian Nationalist Myths of the Shahnameh*. The piece took a myth-busting stance towards claims to secular nationalist Persian cultural purity by laying out an argument based on a historical examination of the cultural mixes between Persian, Turkic, and Arabic linguistic and cultural influences from the 7th century. They based their argument around how the *Shahnameh*, mentioned earlier in this chapter, is interpreted through a culturally and linguistically purist lens, attributing this to the “politicization of the Shahnameh” in the 19th century by modern Iranian nation-building projects by the Pahlavi Dynasty.

The Shahnameh suited the Pahlavi dynasty's goals in two key ways. First, by linking ancient pre-Islamic Persia and today, the Pahlavis sought to distinguish themselves from the Semitic Arab World by underlining Iran's uninterrupted “Aryan” linguistic and, thus, racial credentials. Second, by portraying Ferdowsi as an anti-Arab figure, the Pahlavis created an icon of secular Persian nationalism that opposed Islam's “corrupting” influence, justifying the contemporary political projects of forcible secularization. According to the new pseudo-academic Shahnameh scholarship, Ferdowsi symbolized opposition to Arab influence and helped spread the three major myths outlined above in Iranian schools. In the comments section under the piece, second-generation Rustin, a friend of Beeta's and one of the three co-authors of the piece, responds to a query about the piece's focus on debunking nationalist myths with the following comment:

Iranians growing up in the diaspora (myself included) have been raised with this nationalist narrative, and thus have been co-opted by it unwillingly. The purpose of this article is a response to a particular narrative that has been pushed upon us without any critical examination.

Rustin's comment reflects the particular position from which the young Iranian Americans who wrote this piece are speaking. They argue for an interpretation of the Shahnameh that highlights multicultural exchange and are invested in an understanding of this literary work that eschews Persian national chauvinism or ideological readings. As Rustin writes in another comment:

[T]he *Shahnameh* is often selectively read out of context to prove an ideological point, when in reality the text has multiple interpretations, not all of them overtly nationalistic.

The piece on the Ajam site is similar in its goals to the teach-in on campus. Both reflect how these young people use narratives of the Iranian past as part of claiming a position amidst the narratives that dominate in the environments in which they live. They do this by setting up collectives and teach-ins that are based around peer relationships and common interests. It references a common experience of being exposed to dominant narratives of nationhood that draw on the ancient Persian past. But rather than emphasizing its nationally unifying effect, my respondents reject the aspects of ethnic purism that reside in notions of Iranian nationhood defined by Persian-ness. They are wary of the rifts this pre-Islamic past enhances, in contrast to typical mobilizations of this past that emphasize unity.

These projects re-politicize ancient Persia in a way that challenges Persian-centered ethno-nationalism. It rejects ethnic exclusion of those who identify as non-Persian, such as Turkic and Arab ethnicities in Iran and the diaspora. This politics of ethnic inclusion is waged against nationalist narratives about the *Shahnameh* mobilized since Pahlavi rule in Iran, and persisting today in the diasporic environments in which these young people live. Some respondents note the chauvinistic, racist, and expressly anti-Arab expressions these ideas take on, including among the second generation. For instance, some of my respondents talk about a “Persian Pride” phenomenon among young people around them that sometimes includes these sentiments. Daha’s research on second-generation Iranian Americans argues that the label “Persian” and the history it is associated with boosts pride, self-confidence, and other positive feelings for her research group. She states: “the adolescents viewed identification as *Persian* as warranting cultural pride due to ancient Persian history, but *Iranian* as connected to the Islamic Republic of Iran” (Daha, 2011). The notion of “pride” is mentioned in her work a number of times in the context of ethnic identification as a sentiment to be valued positively.

During my fieldwork I encountered people using “pride” in different senses. On the one hand, Pouneh expressly encourages a sense of pride in one’s history, and this is part of seeing the past as a source of equal inclusion, recognition and countering shame or embarrassment about being Iranian. On the other hand, Pouneh and others also point to the anti-Muslim elements of this same pride. This is something they see as rooted in the way “Persian history” tends to be mobilized by parts of the older generation and is has also emerged among some of their peers as well. The latter is something they express wariness about as they conduct their own emotionally-invested historiography and forge a politics of inclusion and against secular-nationalist/chauvinist interpretations of the past. This is what a blog like *Ajam* does. It is also interesting to understand *how* some second-generation blogs do this.

I contend that they do this by placing discussions about the past and the current use of narratives about it in a new, stylized context. In this regard, the blog, *iPouya* (a blog that has been running for much longer than *Ajam*) can be seen as another illustrative example.¹¹⁴ Like *Ajam*, it is English-language and self-edited. It is also implicitly out to give voice and credence to less dominant perspectives on history and current affairs implicating the Middle East while also making a connection to mainstream cultural/media production such as Hollywood films, international Iranian cinema, (Iranian) pop music, as well as references to academic literature and literary writing (English language). *iPouya* focuses on news and political analysis but also pop cultural elements. These blog projects produce written content that has the consequence of making these young people “a source” of sorts. As the tagline on Pouya’s site states: “A Source on Politics, the Middle East, Film, and Humor.”

Their choices of topics and perspectives to cover reflects their author’s own intellectual interests, but also what I would call – to use a term Pouya uses in his writing – a “diasporic politics of solidarity.” He uses this term to describe what he sees as a productive political positioning of diaspora actors taking critical stances against the Islamic Republic while

¹¹⁴ *iPouya.com* (accessed 10/5/14)

critically claiming belonging to an Iranian nation, but also resisting discrimination and exclusion in the US-based diaspora. , These websites are constituted by a vibrant practice of producing (mostly written) original content, rather than a reproduction (of primary documents, objects, or archives, like what digital heritage is often considered as doing). But one that draws on other sources on history and politics in order to make their own, while facilitating their expressions of political positioning as diaspora members.

This encourages interpretations of the ancient past that are critical and seek to credibly stand alongside or even dislodge existing narratives. It also promotes a message of diversity and inclusion, which these respondents see lacking in some dominant interpretations. There is, therefore, a moral aspect to their interpretations, and this is something I return to in this chapter's conclusion. Malpas argues that digital media should be acknowledged as not only enhancing or extending "the experiential or interpretative engagement with cultural heritage" but as actually changing those very experiences and interpretations of the past: "perhaps a change in the way in which cultural heritage itself appears to us, and so also a change in the way we understand, experience, and interpret ourselves" (Malpas, 2007: 19). This raises the possibility of seeing these blogs as new kinds of sources of cultural heritage. While this may be seen as digital media usage opening the floodgates to supposed unauthorized interpretations (Kalay, 2008), I contend that such interpretations are shaped more by the social settings of collective heritage learning than the mere act of engaging with information about the past through the use of web applications . Rather, the way these applications are used to produce and promote certain interpretations of the past depends on the ways it is integrated into a locally situated initiative or project. In what follows, I discuss another instance of internet usage through which my respondents position themselves, this time at the intersection between Iranian cultural heritage and American nationhood.

Cultural heritage and international diplomacy

Since the beginning of the first term of his presidency, Barak Obama and his administration gave a special significance to the Norooz celebration (mentioned above) by including it in official US discourse around diplomacy with Iran. This was most evident in the Norooz address that US President Obama released for the first time on the evening of Norooz celebrations in 2009. The following is an excerpt from the address.

This holiday is both an ancient ritual and a moment of renewal... Norooz is just one part of your great and celebrated culture... Here in the United States our own communities have been enhanced by the contributions of Iranian Americans. We know that you are a great civilization, and your accomplishments have earned the respect of the United States and the world.

The speech was released as a video recording of 3 minutes and 36 seconds. The video was posted on YouTube on March 19th, 2009 and showed President Obama officially extending his best wishes to “all who are celebrating Norooz in the United States and around the world.” The YouTube video was also embedded on the Whitehouse official blog.¹¹⁵ The speech also addressed the Iranian government by referring to the shared “future” of the US and the Islamic Republic and emphasized “mutual respect”, a sign that was read by many commentators as a move towards diplomacy. Trita Parsi, President of NIAC and foreign policy analyst, was among those who publicly welcomed the speech, calling it an “historic” gesture and a possible “new beginning for US-Iran relations.”¹¹⁶ Those I spoke with were positive and welcoming regarding the video and this appeared to be a cross-generational sentiment at a time when Norooz celebrations were practiced widely within families including both first and second generations.

¹¹⁵ Rhodes, Ben “On Nowruz, President Obama Speaks to the Iranian People,” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2012/03/20/nowruz-president-obama-speaks-iranian-people> (accessed 29/11/14)

¹¹⁶ Parsi, Trita, “Will Tehran Tango: Obama’s historic Christmas greeting,” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/trita-parsi/will-tehran-tango-obamas_b_177222.html (accessed 3/2/15).

The first YouTube video address (from 2009) was circulated broadly among Iranian Americans in LA as well as internationally via email, Facebook, and blogs. It was also broadcast in full on local and satellite Iranian television stations. In the context of families and individuals celebrating and commemorating the coming of a new year, the video was viewed on computer and television screens in houses where this yearly celebration collectively took place. The video was “shared” and commented upon on the Facebook pages of a number of my respondents as they celebrated the event and on the days following. With each successive year and Norooz address, the embracing and/or criticizing of the address on the part of Iranian Americans becomes something of a ritual in itself.

The YouTube video in question shows the US President in close and mid-range shots, sitting in a chair, speaking directly into the camera. Another official version was made, which included Persian language subtitles, and was also posted on YouTube. The uniqueness of this gesture was evident from its contrast with the previous year’s address by then US President George W. Bush, who had given a much shorter address via the Voice of America (VoA) satellite television broadcast. The difference in the content and intended audience of the two men’s messages was reflected in the difference in the choice of media used to disseminate the message. That is, Bush’s message was addressed “to the Iranian people” and was disseminated via a satellite broadcast that was officially banned in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and has significant numbers of viewers inside Iran despite its signal being subject to electronic jamming by the Iranian government.

This action symbolically circumvented the Iranian regime, and carried with it associations with VoA having been set up during WWII by a US government agency, later functioning under the US State Department during the Cold War, during which its radio broadcasts directed at citizens of the Soviet Union were part of US foreign policy. President Obama’s choice not to use VoA but YouTube signifies a break with undermining the leaders of the Islamic Republic, an approach reiterated by him directly addressing Iranian leaders in his speech. Some commentators saw this as a possible opening for diplomatic exchange. Internet takes on a role as part of the diplomatic message itself. The political overtones of

avoiding tendentious broadcast channels and reliance on self-distribution via Iranian Americans themselves shape a different political connection than Bush sought. However, while Obama's Norooz address was given each year in his Presidency, each new address came with stronger condemnation of the Iranian regime and, as some commentators observed, a distinct shift towards the Bush era approach of speaking solely to the "people of Iran" as friends and allies and circumventing Iran's leaders as a diplomatic partner.¹¹⁷

The message was seen and heard by both younger and older audiences, via both television broadcast and internet. An important yet implicit reason why Norooz can be used in this way is because, despite the fact that it is an official holiday recognized by the Islamic Republic, for many Iranians it represents the resistance of Iran's citizens against the Islamic state. That is, Norooz was officially instated in Iran only after the celebration came under fire from the clerical regime for being anti-Islamic and citizens responded with widespread public celebrations in defiance of government efforts to control the public influence of Norooz celebrations. It therefore stands for a certain ambiguity or inconsistency in the Islamic state's rule over its people – it implicitly refers to a rift between Iranian leaders' prescriptions and citizens' practices – but can also be invoked without openly detracting from the authority of an Islamic regime that openly recognizes it.

Obama's public Norooz statement can be understood in symbolic dialogue with the New Year's statement that Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, gives to the Iranian nation around this same time each year. Aside from being a significant political moment for Iranian audiences nationally, it is also covered in international news. The implicit ritual of international diplomacy has become increasingly significant for international audiences with the sustained tensions between Iran and the US, particularly around the negotiations, threats, and actions related to the Iranian nuclear enrichment program. And mainstream

¹¹⁷ As the American Presidential election of 2012 draws near the rhetoric of war with Iran is increasingly a part of Obama's repertoire, making more (Iranian American) commentators grow increasingly critical of his congratulations on Norooz. (see, for example, Shirin Sadeghi's piece in the wake of Norooz, 2012 Sadeghi, Shirin, "The War on Iranian New Year," <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shirin-sadeghi/the-war-on-iranian-new-ye-b-1360875.html> (accessed, 29/11/14)).

news and analysis in the US reflects this interest. Increasingly, those of my respondents who follow these public debates are vocal about criticism of US and EU sanctions against Iran. Beeta, Pouneh, and Pouya are among those who use their respective Facebook accounts to make postings that express their support for a cessation of Obama's sanctions on Iran. The issue also generates face-to-face discussions among my respondents and those (Iranian Americans) around them.

Some of my respondents react to and participate in discussions around this appropriation of Norooz by a head of state as part of international diplomacy. Some have grievances with this tradition is being symbolically used. In 2009, Pouya posted the link to the first of Obama's Norooz messages on his blog. Pouya is a second-generation graduate student in Middle Eastern Studies in his late twenties and has been writing his blog for several years. It covers various topics, particularly current affairs in Iran and the Arab world. His entries include opinion and analysis, as well as light or entertaining posts, and postings in which he asks his readers to discuss a certain topic. The latter was what he did when he posted Obama's Norooz video link, leading to comments ranging from cautious approval to suspicion or dismissal. Three years on, in the wake of Obama's latest Norooz address, one of Pouya's second-generation friends, Lawrence, wrote the following as part of a Facebook "status update" in response to the yearly video message in 2012:

Obama's Norooz message to Iranians? I never listened to it and quite frankly, who cares? Look, for as long as Obama threatens to bomb Iran with his continuation of the Bush administration "all options are on the table" talk (which constitutes a war crime - the very threat of attacking Iran is itself a "crime of aggression") and as long as he continues to do things like place the lives of innocent air travelers in danger by the continuation of the sanctions on the sale of civilian aircraft parts to Iran, never mind the sanction on the sale of medical diagnostic equipment, then he frankly is hardly in a position to wish the Iranian people a happy New Year.

Each year, alongside the family celebrations, interested young Iranian Americans of the second generation like Pouya and Lawrence listen to the words of the American

president.¹¹⁸ While Pouya and Lawrence's opinions were by no means shared uniformly among my respondents, they are examples of how some of my respondents use internet media to position themselves within public debates in the US around diplomacy with Iran. In 2013, this is part of what Pouya had to say on his blog.

At a time when US-led sanctions are creating an artificial shortage of medicine and contributing to soaring inflation in Iran, the Norooz message has become a handy public diplomacy technique for the US government, and another juncture where culture is leveraged as foreign policy.

The amicable and intimate style of Obama's Presidential address follows suit from the mood in which Norooz is generally celebrated among my respondents and in LA more generally. Increasingly, however, the emerging diplomatic rituals around the internet-mediated address and its interpretation are becoming part of how some of my respondents try to re-appropriate the public messages concerning Iran each year around this time. Some of my respondents are vocal about the way Norooz comes to be explicitly associated with symbolic maneuvers towards the Iranian national government in the political context of the Norooz address. The ways they involve themselves in debates around this issue goes against the more common and longer-running tendency among Iranian American representation. Namely, the identity politics waged here claims Norooz as cultural heritage while separating it from the Iranian nation-state.

Similar to the older generation they initiated the use of cultural heritage to publicly distance from the Iranian regime and Iran-based political frameworks within a new cultural political context in the US. But in contrast, for these and other second-generation young people, cultural heritage is a way to also wage identity politics with respect to the American government's actions from the position of American citizens. This re-politicization of Norooz on these respondents' own terms is part of how some of the second

¹¹⁸ Events have developed since then – from the address after the 2009 uprising in Iran and its bloody put-down, to the ebb of this event in international media, to the tightened US sanctions on Iran, to the reintroduced possibilities of military strikes on nuclear facilities.

generation involve themselves in the public discussion. On the one hand, the Presidential Norooz address shows how successful the mainstream establishment of Iranian cultural heritage through the largely de-politicized Norooz ritual has been in the US public discourse. At the same time, however, it reflects how its political utilizations and interpretations are contested. In the following I draw out and elaborate on some of the main points from the examples discussed in this section regarding how my respondents (re-)politicize ancient Persia in new ways through their practices of remembering.

Past empire, current positionings

My respondents actively reframe the past. In doing so, they reassert the correspondence between an ancient empire, modern Iranian nation, and a diaspora “community,” signaling a sense of continuity with the past, a past of which they are a part. They invoke the Persian past in a vast variety of ways and contexts, which allows them to position themselves on various political axes. First, they position themselves against certain nationalist ideologies of interpreting the ancient past; something they associate with the first generation – though not exclusively. They contest what Moallem’s research has argued is a tendency among “Persian national chauvinists” to mobilize the “Persian” past as part of “inventing a golden pre-Islamic age of racial and cultural superiority” (Moallem, 2005).¹¹⁹ They treat such notions as flawed and outdated. Indeed, positioning with relation to Islam in the diaspora context is central to the ways connections to the past are shaped, and I address this point further in the context of the racialization of Islam in Chapter 3.

¹¹⁹ As Moallem also writes: “Under the Pahlavi regime, the construction of a civilized and uncontaminated pre-Islamic Persian was essential in extending this age of ignorance to include the time of the conquest of Iran by the so-called barbaric Muslims, a gesture intended to reinforce anti-Arab and anti-Semitic ideologies.” The age of ignorance she refers to is a reference to the work of Tavakoli-Taraghi who’s 1998 work Moallam states shows that the period before the constitutional revolution of 1904 was framed by some historians as an age of “ignorance (*bikhabari*), stagnation, and despotism” (Moallem, 2005).

Second, despite their contestations of how the past is used, these young people also use the past as a source of pride and dignity. For my respondents, “Persian” is not simply dismissed as a label commonly used to obscuring negative connotations with Iran and the Islamic Republic. Rather, they are concerned about the implications of privileging particular ethnic boundaries within Iranian nationhood. Instead of a source of claiming ethnic superiority towards other ethnic minorities among Iranian diaspora populations or toward other (Middle Eastern) immigrant minorities, pride takes on the purpose of recognition and equal inclusion by American society. Third, they appear ready to politically appropriate Iranian cultural heritage, at least more so compared to past diasporic tendencies towards upholding de-politicized Iranian “culture” as a means for neutralized collective self-mobilization and -presentation.

Inter-generational solidarities emerge here in instances of mobilization around public issues. This was evident in the case of the student group’s support for the Persepolis Tablets campaign. And it was also evident in the way support for the former royal family of Iran was continued by many young, second-generation Iranian Americans. While many of my respondents mentioned correlations between Iranian secular nationalism and an older generation of exiled loyalists, it is clear from the examples I have discussed in this section that this inter-generational relationship is too crisscrossed by shared or conflicting national ideologies to represent a clear generation gap when it comes to the politics of remembering.

The examples I have discussed illustrate how people use the genres of writing and styles of web content production that digital textual/visual media make possible as part of their projects of engaging with the past. In these, internet becomes integrated seamlessly into campaigns and social settings via social styles typical of student activism. As such, internet becomes an important (though often invisible or unacknowledged) part of informal heritage (re-)education practices. At the same time, the way my respondents use internet helps to enrich learning in face-to-face social settings. It also exposes the importance of contestations over the contemporary location and possession of certain tangible historical

objects. As stated, my respondents use the past to position themselves. But they seem to do this not simply for fear that they will otherwise have no past and therefore be excluded. They also do it because otherwise the pasts they question, challenge, and do not claim or want as Iranian Americans will have power over them through the dominant narratives that circulate already.

The genres and styles of writing and organizing that these young people take to with the help of internet help them posit themselves as sources on particular experiences of remembering informed by their activism, engagement, and the events that have shaped their lives. As such, their practices go beyond “transcoding” of historical sources in the way some digital heritage literature has discussed questions raised by networked digital media and the past. Rather, their internet usage positions them as, themselves, niche sources. Pouya, for instance, cultivates this status around films and other forms of multimedia content that is based on preferences, tastes, interests, and experiences. This illustrates how people place politicized rituals alongside contemporary pop cultural and current affairs content. The sociality of (potential) peer relationships gives rise to this as a new environment for interpretation. While I have highlighted especially the role of written text on websites, in the following section I discuss examples that bring to light the more auditory and visual elements of remembering with the help of digital media.

Pop cultural pasts

Taking record of old records

One evening, as we browsed the shelves in Mahssa’s favourite bookstore, she picked up a recently published photo memoir about Iran. It was a thick, hardcover book, and as Mahssa began paging through it we saw the large color photographs on its glossy pages. “See, this is what I mean,” she muttered. Many of the photographs portrayed an Iran during the days of the Shah, depicting him in ceremonious military garb, his queen by his side, her fashion style recognizable for the period and barely distinguishable from iconic Western

equivalents from the 60s and 70s. These photos were followed by the black and white photos of throngs of people in the streets, iconic imagery from the Islamic revolution, which was in turn followed by photographs of the work of Shirin Neshat, featuring black and white photos of veiled women wearing black chadors. Mahssa had earlier mentioned being tired of images of Iran that perpetuated what she thought were clichés of pre- and post-Revolution Iran without the nuance that would appeal to or interest her. She closed the large book and we moved on.

On another night in a Silverlake wine bar Mahssa brought up an idea she wanted to share. It was for a book; a sort of photo journal documenting the lives of “our parent’s generation” through family photographs. A vehicle for putting Iranian pop culture on display through a glimpse of everyday life before the revolution, Mahssa described the idea as being “like the idea of *Pomegranates* but then in book form.” *Pomegranates* was the title of the music compilation she was putting together with a friend, Arash, whom she had met because of their shared, deep interest in music and the music of this Iranian era in particular. *Pomegranates* became a mix of digitally re-mastered pop music from the 60s and 70s of Iran, made up mostly of funk, psychedelic, and folk songs. Mahssa’s idea for representing a pre-Revolutionary Iran she had not lived in to an audience of young peers through pop culture was striking, and her book idea was interesting for its parallels and differences from the book we had previously happened upon together in the book store. The LA Times article that covered the release event of the *Pomegranates* album in 2010 quoted Mahssa as saying:

I've co-opted the nostalgia that surrounds this music as my own, in a way, as my parents' memories of their past and the disconnection that has occurred post-revolution lent in a lot of ways to my struggle in identifying myself.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Hundley, Jessica, “Persian folk, funk, psychadelia winn new generation of fans,” <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/apr/04/entertainment/la-ca-persian-funk4-2010apr04> (accessed 1/12/14).

The nostalgia inherited from parents is an important part of the meaning of a project like *Pomegranates*. Indeed, Arash's contribution to the *Pomegranates* project had included the collection of LP music records he had acquired from his mother. The memories of parents are an important source of information and inspiration for members of the second-generation like Mahssa and Arash. Yet they do not ultimately shape the product the two have created together – that is a product of other influences and inspirations as well. Mahssa and Arash are driven not only by what they inherit from parents but also their stylistic tastes and respective interests in production, as well as a desire to share it with others.

Since the release of the *Pomegranates* album, a growing interest in the preservation and archiving of music and video material from the decades directly preceding the Islamic Revolution was evident among digital databases and websites set up by organizations like Bidoun and Iran Heritage Foundation to compile extensive catalogues of radio programmes, music videos, and songs from Iran in the period between the 50s to late 70s. Aryana was among those who enthusiastically recommended the Iran Heritage Foundation project, *Golha*, to her friends, bringing it to their attention via a link posting on Facebook. The *Golha* Project Website is a searchable database of Iranian poetry and music, accessible via internet by the public, and contains over 1000 hours of audio material. The project's co-sponsor (along with the PARSA Foundation), Iran Heritage Foundation, describes it as such on their website:

The musical and literary repertoire of the programmes known generally as *Golha*, 'Flowers [of Persian Poetry and Song]' was a [series] of weekly radio programmes aired on Iranian radio between 1956 and 1979 which covered the entire history of classical as well as contemporary Persian poetry, giving expression to the whole gamut of traditional Persian music and poetry.¹²¹

¹²¹ Iran Heritage, "The Golha Project: Digital Archive," http://www.iranheritage.org/golha_project/ (accessed 1/12/14).

Similarly, Bidoun's project is one that also digitally archives audio, but includes visual material (films) as well, and is available for public access via their website. In 2009, Bidoun entered a long-term collaboration with UbuWeb, an award-winning online archive for avant-garde media. To date, Bubu has hosted rare and hard to find sound and audio works from the likes of filmmakers Forough Farrokhzad and Artavazd Peleshian, as well as composers Ali Reza Mashayekhi, Halim El-Dabh, and Dariush Dolat-Shahi, among many others. In many cases, Bubu has documented the western avant-garde's encounter with the East; films by Claude LeLouch, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Agnes Varda are also included in this growing collection.

These archives represented a reproduction of the original songs. However, the curating, promoting, and creating the technological infrastructure necessary for making these archives were productive practices. Different organizations and individuals were engaged with these different tasks in order to make these repositories possible. In the case of Arash and Mahssa's curation of the *Pomegranates*, the project was laden with the personal attributes each of them brought to the project, drawing from Arash's family heirloom albums that were invested with deep sentimental value, and Mahssa's niche expertise and long-running experience of searching for and finding vintage records. The volunteer time and energy these two put into the process of gathering and annotating these tracks for the album ultimately generated a product ready for contemporary sale and distribution.

A similar mode of compilation was reflected in Arash's 2013 podcast for *B/ta'arof Magazine* with a set of Iranian pop tracks from the same period, drawn from the same inherited collection. *B/ta'arof* is a print magazine with a connected website Arash as a co-founder of, and which I come back to later on in this section. The following is part of how Arash describes the podcast on the *B/ta'arof* site, where it was released.

Here are fifteen Persian Pop songs from the sixties, seventies, and eighties. The mix includes thirteen chehel-o-panj-dorehs released on the Iranian imprints Ahange Rooz, Apollon, Fine Music, Harmony Apollon, Juliet, Monogram, Pars Record, and Royal, bookended by two long player tracks produced in the United States for the

labels Mainstream and Soundex. It is fitting, for a magazine of Iranian culture produced in diaspora, to begin and end with records made by Iroonis [Iranians] working abroad with non-Iranians.

Efforts to eradicate Persian popular music have made the preservation of pre-revolutionary Iranian records difficult and necessary. I am forever grateful to my mother, Efat Sanai, for saving her records. A collector by nature, most of what you hear — torch songs, beat rock, soundtrack vignettes — originate from a cache kept in a red suitcase, stowed for over thirty years. Though many were carefully preserved in crisp picture sleeves, most bear the marks of heavy use.

Here are fifteen songs that tell a story. The story's theme is longing, which is, of course, the primary obsession of Persian Pop. Enjoy.¹²²

Creating and making available these digital archives means creating a repository from this particular time and place. As a guest on SWANA (South Asian, West Asian, and North African) Radio in a piece dedicated to Persian Pop, Arash explains the importance of the project of documenting this music by highlighting the destruction it has faced in the context of post-revolution Iran. “No systematic discography has been assembled and published. No comprehensive survey exists in print. We’re doing this work because it has to be done.” While the musical compilation in the form of an album is different from the digital repositories mentioned earlier (in form, and curative production process, for instance), there appear to be similarities in the drive behind these projects to document, showcase, and disseminate musical material from pre-revolution Iran, particularly of the 60s and 70s.¹²³

¹²² Saedinia, Arash, “Podcast,” <http://www.btaarof.com/podcast.html> (accessed 1/12/14).

¹²³ Ajam Media’s Mix Tape is another example of a digitized compilation disseminated via a website.

Jarazadeh, Kamyar, “Ajam Mixtape #2: Psychedelic Sounds from Iran and Beyond,” <http://ajammc.com/2014/02/16/ajam-mixtape-2-psychedelic-from-iran-and-beyond/> (accessed 29/11/14)

In Arash's description of the podcast on the site, the theme of (romantic) longing, including Persian words in his writing, the reference to diaspora, and the connections to the story of Iran's pre-revolution years told through its music together implicitly speaks to others who recognize his positioning. It spreads a layer of familiar nostalgia over what would otherwise be a record, an archive. It draws on the recognition of young Iranian Americans like himself of a period that is familiar to them through their parents' memories. Even if the songs are not familiar, the context in which they are being remembered most likely is. These practices not only recall the past, but also implicitly refer to how this past is often recalled among Iranian Americans, that is, nostalgically. Nostalgia becomes a repertoire in the sense that, as Giaccardi describes, drawing on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004), it is:

[N]ot merely that of a *digital archive* meant to collect and preserve in time and space the representation of a specific heritage. Rather, it is a "*repertoire*" – meant to sustain the whole system of knowledge and social relations responsible for a heritage creation, transmission, and reproduction as a living system (Giaccardi, 2007: 118).

I would argue that this "living system" is animated by the associations with this period and the styles it represents. The podcast, like the album, are forms more closely associated with contemporary musical/audio production than historical archives or databases. These projects seem to align this part of Iranian musical history with present trends in order to make it appealing. At the same time, they tend to produce a sense of reverence about that past. There is a blurring of the lines between the task of transcoding/remediating the musical material in order to keep it in tact, and the task of socially transmitting nostalgia and a feeling of wonder about this past.

The interest in this era is wrapped in nostalgia passed down from parents. But these archiving and preservation projects are started up by the second generation. The passionate interests of my respondents draw on their parents' memories and knowledge but go beyond it to other sources of living memory and other enthusiasts. Drawing on Maghbouleh's notion of "inherited nostalgia" it is possible to see how first-generation

parents' "authentic relationships and histories" connecting them to "the homeland" is in effect (Maghbouleh, 2010a). However, equally important is understanding how this practice of remembering opens avenues for creative production and notions of diaspora that go beyond a homeland nostalgia of the first generation.

More specifically, the appeal of this period in Iranian music not only characterized by the connection to the first generation through nostalgia, but also by a particular mixture of Eastern and Western stylistic elements. "I don't really experience it like that [i.e. nostalgically]," Kourosh told me. He liked the hairstyles, the clothes, the songs, and the dances that are characteristic of a time in Iran's recent history that he feels a connection to. Some of my respondents saw engaging with this past as less as a nostalgic experience and more one that allows them to learn about an Iran they did not know about. The value of the "East-West encounter" described on the Bidoun website is reminiscent of some of my respondents' interest in this period when Iranian music was in an area of strong cross-border collaboration and mutual influence, when Iranian artists and media productions received regular international praise. This interest in Iranian music through the lens of international appreciation fascinated Arash particularly. He told me about a song Googoosh had sung entirely in Spanish – to him this signified an era in Iranian music history when pop influences flowed to and from Iran, and Iranian talent and creativity enjoyed international recognition.

He and Mahssa were interested in the ways the Shah's "modernization" policies had been a forceful push for Iran to enter international music scenes. The particular abruptness of that shift alongside the longer-entrenched traditions of Iranian musical production in Iran constitute a particular process of blending, one shaped by the musical practices, tastes, and traditions of the time, as well as by the imposed cultural policies of the then-monarchy. At the same time, the influences from Iranian classical and folk music and longer-running regional influences were an element that Arash and Mahssa both emphasized. For them and the many who shared their fascination, it was these particular circumstances of production and the mixture of familiar Western and Eastern musical and style influences

that were as important a part of this cultural memory as the musical products themselves. In this way, a range of Iranian listeners but also others are also envisioned as audiences and appealed to. Keeping record of these old records in the ways described here is something that not only makes these members of the second generation producers themselves. Their productions are also a way for them to position themselves with relation to other dominant ways of representing the past (as the one Mahssa was disappointed with, which I described at the beginning of this section) and with relation to wider audiences of Iranians and non-Iranians with similar tastes.

In addition, the broader qualities of the “vintage” style appears to be making a resurgence through these young people’s practices of remembering. It also tells us about the need and sensibility among these young people to make connections to this style, and make connections to one another in the process of doing so. In other words, the fact that this period is remembered in this particular way by this generation illuminates a value invested in retro, vintage, and nostalgic sensibilities that is not limited to the interest in Iranian pasts. The fact that Mahssa runs a record store called Mount Analog that stocks music primarily on vinyl and tape is a testament to this. The meanings of Iranian American-ness are compounded by the contemporary “cool”-ness of nostalgic musical scenes more generally. As a result, the appeal of this genre among members of the second generation hinges in part on its designation as “cool” by wider standards, particularly in youth cultures. This appeal seems to lie not only in the popularity of musical “oldies,” but also in vintage records as a *niche* area of interest, such that the (re)discovery of the music itself becomes part of the creative process because of its rarity and age. And as Nedelcu has argued of migrants ways of using internet to find home and belonging, it can help underscore and defend particularistic values (Nedelcu, 2012b).

(Re)Discovered in a context where niche musical styles are trendy among American audiences, Iranian nostalgia music seems to strike a balance between the popular power of “cool” and the air of connoisseur appeal that comes with being “rare.” Hence, both nostalgia enthusiasts and casual listeners find themselves among wider American and perhaps

international music audiences with similar tastes.¹²⁴ The “cool” of this musical style to my respondents is difficult to define; such is the nature of “cool.” This is what Lewis MacAdams suggests in his cultural history of the idea of “cool,” studying artists and musicians the American 1940s and 50s (MacAdams, 2001). “Cool” is evasive. Not only because the standard for what is “cool” changes as styles change (i.e. as soon as something is deemed “cool” by enough people it ceases to have the same power and is hence less “cool”). But also, it is defined by an impossibility to place (i.e. explaining what “cool” is defies “cool” as it is something one must simply know, be attuned to). And it is this latter quality that makes it such a strong and common contemporary notion around which community (and youth subcultural communities involving musical genres and scenes) is implicitly formed.

“Cool” is also an un-communicated yet shared understanding that works to bind people around certain tastes and styles. What I try to show here is that the rich past of Iranian pop culture offers my respondents important elements to work with when it comes to using web applications as part of digitizing and disseminating their (re)productions of the past. And they utilize these pasts while paying homage to them and raising their relevance to contemporary audiences (including the second generation). The websites and pages being used also offer particular ways to engage with this past. In the following I discuss this further.

Mediating the past

Kourosh describes the experience of listening to the old records in vinyl form as a special experience. He describes the first time he did this as an especially memorable incident. As with most of the five hundred albums he had collected and kept in his room, he had bought

¹²⁴ The vintage music genre and the wider popular fascination with rediscovering music from the past has parallels to World Music as a broader genre that may also interact with ethnic/diaspora music tastes. Although the music in question could be categorized as vintage world music I do not enter the discussion about world music (and the commercialization of) minority/ethnic cultural production here.

the record second hand online, and was excited to listen to it for the first time. He carried the album with excitement to the record playing equipment in the university library as he did not have his own sound system that played LPs. The sound quality was so remarkable that the experience of sitting by himself in the UCLA library, listening with headphones to this album in a sound booth, became a meaningful connection with his piece of the past after years of listening to downloaded songs or CD albums. It was an interface that required effort, but for Kourosh it was more than worth it. It was also an experience of how the original product was consumed and intended to be consumed in when it was first made by the artist.

It was his “own sense of being in place and experiencing the moment of ‘heritage’” (Smith, 2006: 2). This experience solidified Kourosh’s emersion in the music genre. It was a memorable experience with nostalgia music for him after having only listened to Iranian pop music via internet downloads or digital recordings. Kourosh’s use of internet bolstered his hobby and interest of collecting and listening to nostalgia music. However, as his account illustrates, the mediation through LP and the embodied circumstances of the listening experience he recalls is not achieved through internet.

For Kourosh retro associations with the music are most strongly felt when consuming it in the original media form. Interestingly, this value for the original media form is replicated in the production of Pomegranates in LP format. Not simply that they can be accrued, but that they have the status of a collector’s item because of their rarity and historical significance both as musical productions valuable to niche audiences quite independent from their status as remnants from an Iranian past. Although new productions are made, they are subject to the same rigors of preservation as older ones. In fact, they are made with this purpose in mind. This reflects the limits of these websites in mediating these sounds and tactile remnants of recordings of the past. These digital repositories do not mediate the whole breadth of experiencing the past that old records do, and its role is evident in this comparison. It does not seem to mediate the weight (in both senses of the word) of these

important artifacts, whether they are objects from the past that have survived over time, or newly-made objects intended and designed to survive into the future.

Kourosh enjoys the special thrill of finding rare records from this period. These objects are rare not only because many have not withstood degradation over time, but specifically because of the calculated destruction and banning of much of this music by the Islamic regime. For some, this makes the project of preservation all the more urgent. Kourosh's excitement at having obtained an original record is heightened when he has the opportunity to meet the artist at a concert. "Then I show them their records that they haven't even seen in decades. They really like it. And I get their autographs," he explains with a satisfied smile. He confesses that although he introduces many of his close friends to the music he is passionate about, he is reluctant to encourage people to become enthusiasts and start collecting records, as this would only create more competition on a market of already rare collector's items.

There are similarities here with the case of the magazine, *B/taarof*. *B/taarof* was set up in 2012 by second-generation Iranian Americans based on both American coasts. On its website the tagline read: "Print magazine & website featuring visual arts, critical essays, curated archives, & oral histories of Iran/Iranians across generational & geographic borders." It was also described by one of its founding editor's, Arash D, in the following way in an email he circulated to contacts around the magazine's inception: "*B/ta'arof* is a niche publication, meant to be published in limited numbers for a limited amount of time." When I spoke to Arash D about their choice to put out a print publication he emphasized the value he saw in carefully creating and distributing a high quality physical product with original content rather than having a fully web-based project. For *B/taarof*, the website plays the role of a shop window for the magazine, showcasing some of the visual elements used in the print publication. It was never meant to be a website alone, but as a quarterly print publication with a website addendum where some of the design content was posted digitally online, as well as subscriptions to the print version being made available for order through the site.

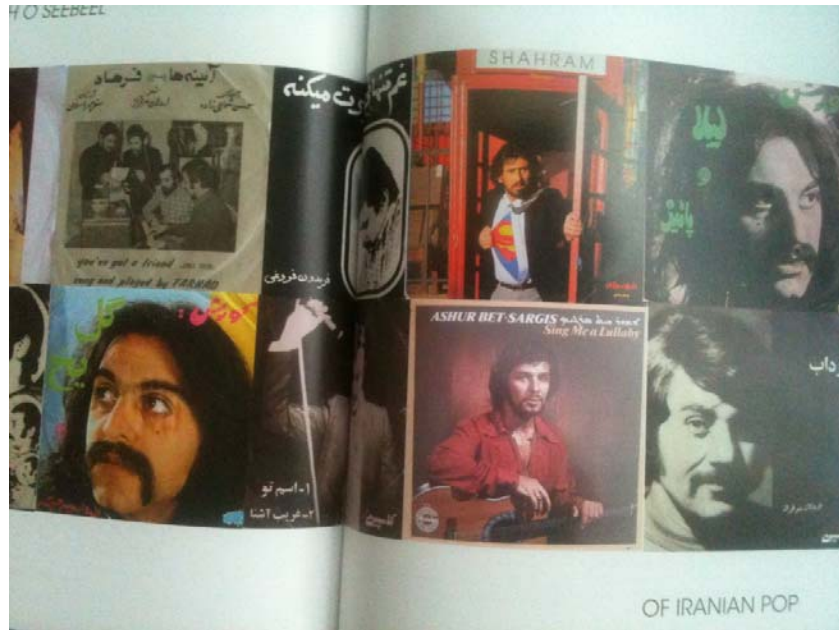


Figure 5 Photograph I made of a spread from B|taarof Magazine, Issue 2, July 2013

This collaboration is another one that involves a number of second-generation contributors (and others), many of whom are contacts of the editors. I see the parallels with the production of *Pomegranates* in the attention paid to creating a certain tactile and visual experience of appreciation. The aesthetic experience of leafing through a printed copy of B|taarof that one has received in the mail offers a different experience of the rich photographic and graphic design elements the magazine heavily includes. Close to every page has formatting that includes text as well as color-printed illustration/design/photography on the semi-glossy paper. It is a product that is sold and promoted online and the Indigogo.com crowdsourcing website is use for fundraising. It is also stocked by selected (Iranian) book stores in various east and west coast cities.

The pages of the second issue boast prints of historical posters, stamps, and photographs. The past is captured as a stylized, artistic rendition that displays a retro aesthetic. There is an artisan aura about the consumption of a niche product that eschews mass production and is concerned with the care and detail that goes into the styling of the thing. As Cameron writes of historian Graeme Davidson's view on heritage:

According to Davison, heritage represents a preoccupation with material remains, elevates materiality along with the unique and handmade as more valuable, and articulates a distaste for mass production (Cameron, 2008: 178).

The digital and the tactile alongside being used together as part of the *B/taarof* project allows for a different experience with the content of the magazine. Somewhat similar to the relationship of the Pomegranate album to its promotional site, the digital version is a teaser, an introduction, a necessary access point to audiences, and a channel to sales and promotion. Having a physical production, however, reinforces the embodied experience of engaging with those objects through touch, sight, and sound in ways that cannot be experienced in the same way through listening to the music online. Nor would it be precisely the same in the case of printed design as part of a magazine versus digitally displayed on a webpage.

The magazine can be laid on a coffee table, picked up and flicked through as a talking piece – it brings with it a certain kind of sociality. And this apparently fits the niche objective the editors started out with. Web applications are used here in a supportive function to communicate *about* the physical productions in question, but not to be the central conduit for the content. The cultural repository created through these digital archives establishes the memory of pop cultural pre-Revolution Iran, and it gives it a certain materiality by designating a certain page or archiving infrastructure. Websites are central to these emerging efforts to curate and create the groundwork for setting up archives.¹²⁵ This has clear differences from the materiality of a magazine on a coffee table or an original record that can be signed by its artist decades after its release.

¹²⁵ The creation of such repositories as discussed here raises issues concerning how digital archives can themselves become incorporated into institutionalized heritage discourses and practices. As Cameron writes, “Interestingly, current definitions of digital heritage in the UNESCO charter admit new work in different media as heritage and give them equal standing... [T]hese new products are tethered to systems of significance and discourses of preservation and conservation. Digital materials include texts, databases, still and moving images, audio, graphics, software and web pages, among a wide and growing range of formats. ... Many of these resources have lasting value and significance, and therefore constitute a heritage that should be protected and preserved for current and future generations” (Cameron, 2008: 173).

But this is also a social aspect to the purpose that web applications serve. For instance, Kourosh used certain websites and social media platforms to find other people who were interested in the genre of nostalgia music and vintage records. Finding an old video on YouTube can have something of a similar feeling. For instance, I could hear Arash's excitement as he invited me to "Check this out" as he showed me a YouTube video as he sat behind his desk in his room. Sitting on the bed behind him I could see the screen on which the music video played, the woman singing in it had feathered hair and she swayed back and forth as the shot stayed on her for noticeably longer than contemporary music videos conventionally do. Though I did not recognize her, the look and feel of the clip was clearly one of a different time in music video production. We watched and listened while commenting with recognition on the style of a bygone time. A seemingly endless pool of Iranian music videos from decades past have been uploaded to YouTube, especially of entertainment shows that featured Iranian artists' musical performances. This allowed young people like Arash and others who had been too young to engage with this music at the time of its release access to the material. And that at any moment when they have access to a computer or mobile device with internet.

While video uploads were easily searchable, internet was also used to make connections with those who uploaded such content. Kourosh described developing a friendship around a shared interest in rare vintage records from Iran with another Iranian American young man who also lived in Southern California. Having come into contact via the website Iranoldies.com, the two repeatedly met up face-to-face, eventually becoming friends in the process. Kourosh had also been in contact with Arash through a MySpace page that Arash had started up entitled FarsFunk. FarsFunk was a site that posted images, information about, and samples of vintage Iranian records, including album cover art and photographs. Since the relative decline of MySpace and rise of Facebook since then, Arash set up a similar Facebook page entitled "*Pop Irani*" (Iranian Pop). Arash and Kourosh had conducted email correspondence with one another but never met in person.

The use of Facebook allows “sharing” that brings with it a certain sociality that adds to the direct contact between enthusiasts like Arash and Kourosh. On the page of *Pop Irani*, the photographs and videos with accompanied textual annotation (written in a combination of English and Persian script as well as transliteration of Persian words) are posted. While the format is that of a standard Facebook page, it is interesting that the original context in which the products were formerly consumed stays partially intact. For instance, much of the time, the television shows in which the videos appeared are named, like the show *Rangarang*. The photographs that are taken from magazine covers are presented as “Iranian Old Magazine Covers” via the Facebook page of that name, with the dates and titles of the publications included. Hence, on the one hand the materiality of the digital reproductions is embedded in the sociality built around sharing and consuming in the context of a social media platform. Yet at the same time, the materiality of the original media objects – the television show or the magazine – (and not just loose visual images) is referenced as part of, and adding to, the experience of remembering. In this way, the materiality of the older media forms is part of the remembering experience. While the sociality of the new, digital media through which it is “shared” gives a new social veneer to the experience.

Another social media platform, MySpace, was how Arash and Mahssa had come into contact. The common interest in Iranian Funk music formed the basis of their first encounters. At this time Mahssa was a DJ living in New York. However, following a personal decision to move to and live in LA, she and Arash had met face to face and started the *Pomegranates* project together. These connections were made through the MySpace platform when it was becoming largely music-oriented. Social exchanges, relationships, and collaborations developed around contact made because of a shared niche interest. Yet, evidently, in their development and maintenance these connections required face-to-face upkeep, which internet communications could not provide. Mahssa and Arash’s collaboration was a longer-running affair, but Kourosh’s contact with his new friend dwindled over a longer period of not seeing one another as their regular daily activities got in the way of opportunities to meet. The main affordance of internet in this regard is

allowing a small pool of enthusiasts to find one another. The local distances, people's schedules, and their social propensities shape whether this initial contact develops into longer-term exchanges. It also shapes whether or not the shared interest might develop into shared production – as it did in the case of the *Pomegranates* project. Alongside the websites that promote other media productions, these social media sites are used to make connections around niche interests.

Framing and contesting style

The popularity of this period and its styles seemed to be rooted in the rarity of its endangered status – a period of cultural products and lifestyle that had fallen victim to eradication and oppression by the Islamic Republic. Its appeal was also rooted in the familiarity of styles that were similar to those recognizable from the same period on the US and its close fit with trends contemporary trends towards “vintage cool”. Second generation filmmaker and artist Maryam, who made an intimate documentary film about the journey of her father and his friends to the United States and their lives in 70s California, made a point about this. She claimed that current interest in the Iran of the 60s and 70s seems to overlap with a broader American nostalgia about that same period in the US, a sentiment that she said was prevalent in the cultural references that this generation of young Americans are exposed to as well.

Duyvendak writes about the meanings of nostalgia in America (which he contrasts with Europe) as a longing for “better times,” a more cohesive and familiar nation of the past. (2011). He argues that this looking back also creates notions of collectivity, feelings of home, and inclusion/exclusion of certain people. In contrast to his description of the rather culturally conservative past that revolves around the cohesion of the ideal nuclear family as the scaled-down nation, Maryam's comment above suggests that a more specific nostalgia for the period of the 60s and 70s in contemporary American popular culture is part of a more politically progressive national sentiment. And the nostalgic collective remembering

of this specific American past might work to include Iranian Americans who remember both the atmosphere of protest and social freedom, and the appearance of popular styles attributed to this period in both countries.

Drawing from Maryam's above comment, remembering this period has a more general appeal. It is not only about recalling Iran before the Islamic revolution in order to contrast it to the present day. It is equally about an era when new and influential styles of music, fashion, and politics took on global appeal. It is a time that is also remembered in American pop culture for the same styles. This is the recognizable thing about it in the contemporary resurgence of that era's "cool." This remembering can be seen as not simply being about recalling (collective) experiences, but about cultivating a sense of shared experience as a way of forming social connections. Smith argues of memory's role in heritage formation, that heritage is not just an aid to memory, but is "about the creation of shared memories that work to help create and maintain bonds between family and community members" (L. Smith, 2006). As new generations are raised and develop themselves, how this process of memory creation takes shape is important as a means of regenerating community over time.

Remembering cultivates a taste for certain art forms and styles, drawing on a nostalgia for a time that is associated with the youth of their parent's generation – an implicit parallel between the two generations. My respondents tailor this past to contemporary, young audiences, framing styles of the past as recognizable yet specialized reference points. They desire appreciation for the products of Iran's pop cultural past not only by other Iranian Americans of the first and second generation, but connoisseur, hip, and interested non-Iranian publics as well. Their role as curators and producers comes to the fore, sometimes overshadowing the interest or knowledge of the average person with living memory of the time. For instance, Kourosh says that even though he can enjoy LA concerts by some of the old pop stars with his parents these days, his parents are nevertheless "not good sources of information" when it comes to music of the period. His interest goes further than theirs, and so he can no longer rely on their memories to uncover the musical pasts he is

interested in. Through this active role, and through their specialized interests, my respondents define imaginations of pre-revolutionary Iran by choosing what to include/exclude in their remembering and their (re)productions and how. Nostalgia, as Boym's seminal work mentions, does not rely on "virtual realities" created by technology, but relies on "the capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness" (Boym, 2001: 50). Web usage is an important means of doing the production and promotion that this involves. But in some instances it lacks the necessary capacity to mediate bodily experiences and the materiality of tangible production of a record that awakens the necessary planes of consciousness that engagement with physical objects are able to do. For this reason, web usage takes place within the context of other media usages in order to mediate the past.

My respondents combat the official forgetting of this past by Islamic government, and also seek to address a wider lack of comprehensive documentation. Despite the nostalgic associations, they contest these practices of remembering and the deployment of these styles purely in terms of symbolizing an idealistic pre-Islamic past. Instead, by making work of showcasing specific style elements in the products they seek to preserve, they create a contemporary frame for engagement with this past for their own generation. They do this in a way that goes beyond the boundaries of their migrant generation and encompasses generation as a broader cohort. The role of internet here is to allow people to find products, to produce within collaborative projects, and access audiences, drawing them into purchases or other interpersonal exchanges around niche interests. As part of the production process, internet enhances the ability of my respondents to set up projects in which they collate and curate digital material and create social connections. In this way, their web usage becomes more refined and bounded because of the niche interests and particular styles and products it is organized around. Style brings about a certain shared appreciation for a certain way of being Iranian. As has been argued with regard to heritage, remembering, and style:

The importance of style is the effectiveness by which certain styles link and revive shared sentiments and instigate strong feelings of togetherness. Seen this way, style is not something given. To be recognized and unfurl its effects, style has to appear, and in order to appear it has to be appropriated, animated, and embodied by people who identify with it (Probst, 2009: 119).

Going further, Meyer (2009) argues that style has a central significance in the formation of communities and subjects. She emphasizes that the study of media must pay attention to the adoption of shared styles, as these “modes of doing things” are essential for “processes of subjectivation.” In this sense, styles are seen as at once shaping people and giving them a shared identity (Meyer, 2009). In this and the previous sections of this chapter I have shown that the way in which things are remembered is just as important as what is remembered because this shapes who the practices of remembering include, appeal to, and belong to.

Conclusion

The past is used and made relevant to my respondents through the claims it allows them to make to collective inclusion, pride, recognition, and appreciation. Yet, beyond this instrumentality, an Iranian past has power over my respondents whether they like it or not. It haunts them with a sense of ambivalence if they do not know “enough” about it, it instills them with a sense of loss/subjugation in the absence of institutional recognition, and it ignites their action when they see it as being used in morally and politically odious ways by others. In one way or another, the way my respondents engage with the past makes it seem like an unquestionable link between Iran and themselves. Indeed, they actively give this link various meanings. Yet the fact that the Iranian past implicates them, and who they are, is treated as a given.

It provides a discourse for links between identity and the past to become self-evident; something that “just is.” So powerful is this effect that, as Smith has pointed out, one shortcoming in heritage research itself is that:

The idea of ‘identity’ tends to be unproblematically linked with concepts of ‘heritage,’ taking the link between identity and heritage for granted... the actual processes and activities that are enacted to forge links between heritage and identity are often not identified in the literature (Smith, 2006: 301)

The link with the Iranian past is treated as a given despite it being actively forged and continually remade, in this case by/for the second generation. For different reasons and under different conditions than their parents’ generation, my respondents also submit to the power of their own productions and reproductions of the past. For most of them, the connection to Iranian-ness is not something made but the excavation of something that has always been there; something inherited. And the appeal this has to them exposes a need for authenticity in their modes of belonging, the need for a stable and incontestable relationship with Iranian-ness – something, it should be mentioned, that has consistently eluded most of them.

This authentic relationship to being Iranian is something felt and experienced through particular engagements with the past. Their interactions with artifacts, their momentary bodily experiences, and their engagements with the materiality of made products all “enable the sensory experience of history”(Serematakis, 1996) for those whom I have given accounts of. Maffesoli argues that certain shared sensibilities create a collective sentiment, and he also suggests that these shared sensibilities rely essentially on the cultivation of a shared style (1996). I have argued that my respondents’ ways of re-politicizing the past, re-educating themselves, and re-defining diaspora together are part of how collective sentiments are attuned. And their styles of remembering the Iranian past are how they appeal to other members of the second generation, and particular groups of people therein.

Used in this way, the experience of the past can also reify and frame Iranian-ness, reinforcing that taken-for-granted link between identity and the past. A link that is recognized by established social and institutional forces on various scales local museums, global heritage discourses, national government discourses. However, this past is not as nationally bounded as it may seem at times. The Iranian past that my respondents mobilize is multifacted, dynamic, highly politicized and caught between local and international forces. It is at once a national past and one that seeps through the symbolic boundaries of the nation. It overlaps and intersects with the American national past, as well as local immigration histories, and regional histories of the Middle East. In this way my respondents contest and supplement existing and dominant practices and narratives perpetuated by those around them by taking active roles in remembering.

What is the role of their web usage in mediating and hence enabling this “sensory experience of history” I have discussed? When it comes to discursive practices of posterity, conservation, ownership, rarity, and origins, physical objects are seen as mediating elements of the past that the web applications used cannot. In this way, physical objects have a certain power in practices of remembering, and as I have shown in this chapter, web usage reinforces this power rather than diminishing it or dislocating it through de-contextualization of digital media productions as some have suggested of digital heritage. The role of web usage is an important one. It affords practices of production, curation, re-education, and political contestation through its many different technical capacities. It is used as part of efforts to frame and contest the past. Its shortcomings do not lead to its abandonment, but supplementation and incorporation into other media practices used to mediate the past.

Through their internet usage, my respondents select, collect, and present certain elements of the past in order to preserve them, and in doing so, style and secure their own version of the past, creating what Eva Lam’s work on globalization and youth media cultures has called “affinity groups” socially selected around niche interests (Lam, 2006). This contributes to a certain shared cosmology. Malkki states that “the construction of a national

past is a construction of history of a particular kind” (Malkki, 1995: 1), something she calls a mythico-history, which is concerned with “the constitution of an ontological, political, and moral order of the world.” I see the way my respondents style the past as representing such a concern for ordering the world, as well as a concern for how they position themselves within it.

Web applications facilitate access to the copies, digitizations, and networks that feed the creative processes of producing and reproducing and bestowing importance on a past for young people to hold on to both literally and figuratively. Contrary to the concerns expressed by the older men described at the outset of this chapter, my second-generation respondents’ practices reflect the ways they appropriate the past and reframe it as they do so. In fact, even show a parallel concern for loss and forgetting. The particular affordances of the web applications covered in this chapter - in conjunction with other media forms and physical objects that mediate experiences of the past – is important for how they come to mediate the past.

Chapter 3 Race

Introduction

“Check it right, you aint white.” This was the slogan of a 2010 census campaign to encourage Arab Americans to fill out the US Census by answering the “race” question by writing “Arab” instead of checking the box, “White.” In the same year, and also for the first time, a coalition of Iranian American organizations encouraged Iranian Americans to make a similar decision by checking something other than “white” in the race rubric. The campaign¹²⁶ encouraged Iranian Americans to not only fill out the census, but also indicate their “race” as “other” and then writing in “Iranian American”, “Iranian”, or “Middle Eastern.” On Facebook, some of my respondents also drew attention to the parallel Arab American campaign and its catchy slogan. The Iranian American campaign was unique in its success at bringing together a broad range of Iranian American organizations around a single issue: the accurate counting of American residents of Iranian descent. Its somewhat more serious slogan was, “Stand up and be counted.”¹²⁷

Yet the campaign also had its humorous side, most notably represented by a comical PSA (or Public Service Announcement) that was spread on YouTube in the run-up to the weeks

¹²⁶ Launched by the new organization that was also set up in 2010 called the Iranians Count Census Coalition [IraniansCount.org](http://www.iranianscount.org/), “The Iranians Count Census Coalition Releases the Special Tabulation Results from the 2010 U.S. Census,” <http://www.iranianscount.org/> (accessed 29/11/14)

¹²⁷ This slogan is the recognizable from a host of other census campaigns directed at racial and ethnic minorities in the US, including campaigns for undocumented immigrants, whose numbers are known to be underestimated in official counts, just as is the claim of many about Iranian Americans, especially in California.

of the US Census' administration.¹²⁸ The short video starred Iranian American comedian and actor Maz Jobrani and was a collaboration with the Canadian-based organization, Iranican, which circulates its podcasts and video reports via its website. The Iranican site has a relatively young audience, and was popular among my respondents. The video they posted was quickly shared by a great number of my contacts via Facebook while Jobrani received much attention for his involvement in the campaign. This included international news coverage of the phenomenon of Middle Eastern American minorities claiming non-whiteness in an official and organized way.¹²⁹

In the video, Maz Jobrani plays multiple characters that represent various Iranian stereotypes. These costumed and exaggeratedly impersonated characters depict a range of first-generation, Iranian male types. Among them are a self-important and wealthy doctor, a young and showy lady's man and very recent arrival from Iran, and an elderly man who has ostensibly grown old in the US. These characters are approached at their homes by a census worker to fill in the national census forms. The census worker is a temperate, friendly, young second-generation Iranian American woman. Humorous moments ensue in the interactions between Jobrani's characters and the census worker in each case. The video cuts between the scenarios with the different characters showing the viewer, finally showing a parallel between them – and the main comedic moment in the sketch –when it comes to the question about “race.” They all unequivocally give the same response when asked what their race is: “Italian.”¹³⁰

¹²⁸ Iranican, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgoLjFj0rVg>. (accessed 29/1/14) The official PSA video for the campaign was a more serious one than the more humorous production Iranican, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgoLjFj0rVg> (accessed 29/1/14)

¹²⁹ See, for instance CNN's coverage: Blake, John, Arab- and Persian-American campaign: 'Check it right' on census," <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/US/04/01/census.check.it.right.campaign/index.html> (accessed 29/1/14)

¹³⁰ Racial covering on official forms in particular was associated by many with an additional factor of Iranian Americans being reluctant to give information to the US government. This is a tendency associated especially with the older first generation who mistrusted the US government like they mistrusted the Iranian government, or thought that the information would not remain confidential. Similar explanations were given in the context of voter registration campaigns targeting older Iranian American citizens in the 2008

The video draws attention to a recognizable trope among a great many Iranian Americans, namely, the Iranian American who practices racial/ethnic covering by disguising or misrepresenting his/her origins as non-Iranian or non-Middle Eastern.¹³¹ Interestingly, the video sketch also implicitly gives a generational characteristic to this trope, as is seen in the interaction between the second-generation census worker and the various other characters who are all first-generation immigrants. The message of the video is to show the importance of filling out the census accurately and with attention to the “race” question by poking gentle fun at the known tendency in many Iranian Americans to avoid claiming such difference from the white American majority. I came to see the 2010 census campaign as indicative of a broader change in the way Iranian Americans are starting to see themselves racially, and also in how they want to be seen by others – it was much more than the incidental use of an official category on the census.¹³²

The first set of questions this raised for me concerned the significance of race for my respondents. Race has only recently begun appearing in social scientific research on Iranian migrants in the US (see Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Mostofi, 2009). In particular, it is discussed with reference to post-9/11 conditions of Islamophobic discrimination against Iranians living in the US. A larger amount of scholarship has been dedicated to Muslim Americans and South Asian Americans, including the second generation (Jamal & Naber, 2008; Joshi, 2006), and some have included Iranian Americans in discussions of

presidential election. However, as I show elsewhere in this chapter, issues around racial covering extends beyond aversion to official registrations and government data collections into contested everyday practices.

¹³¹ Indeed it is pertinent to note that the overall results of the 2010 census did not show any significant increase in the numbers of Iranian Americans who indicated racial difference. In fact it indicated a decrease. For one analysis of this phenomenon see: Hosseini, Hossein, Iranian Americans and the 2010 census: did we shrink? <http://www.payvand.com/news/12/may/1170.html> (accessed, 29/11/14)

¹³² Formal racial categorizations in the US on the Census are overseen by the federal agency, the Bureau of the Census, which as Yanow states, first heard substantial opposition to the categorizations and ways people were being counted since the 1990 census (Yanow, 2002). This led to certain revisions in certain category names and definitions. However, the definition of “white” according to the US Census has essentially remained the same since before the revisions were made up until the most recent census in 2010. Namely: “‘White’ refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa, the Middle East or North Africa. It includes people that indicated their race(s) as ‘White’ or reported entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian.” According to the “Definition of Race Categories Used in the 2010 Census” in a report issued by the Census Bureau and compared to the pre-1990 definition given by Yanow (2002).

post-9/11 lives of Muslims in North America (MacCloud, 2006; Moghissi, Rahnema, & Goodman, 2009) with more of a focus on immigrant religion than race. Still, the recent racialization of Iranian Americans remains a relatively understudied area.¹³³ And in particular, few have treated the racialization of Iranians (and Middle Easterners) in the US as part of an ongoing historical process that far precedes 9/11 and continues dynamically for more than a decade in its wake. Minoo Moallem sees the representation of “Islamic fundamentalism” as a discourse that has peaked after the events of 9/11, while having been “a discourse that has been decades in the making” (Moallem, 2002: 298) before these attacks. In this chapter I focus on how my second-generation respondents see themselves with relation to the present atmosphere of racialization, taking into account how they relate to their parents’ generation’s ways of positioning themselves racially, which spans before 9/11.

In the example of Census 2010, the importance of being officially recorded as a distinct “community” by way of one’s race was explained in the following way by the authors of the campaign literature:

Numbers count! Showing the growth of the community translates into increased influence and recognition within American society. 1) Civic uses: Ethnic organizations depend wholly on ancestry data to identify, locate and mobilize their constituencies; civil rights agencies also require ancestry data to monitor discrimination based on national origin. 2) Political Influence: Numbers translate into power. Elected officials target ethnic constituencies on numerous occasions to solicit their feedback. The more Iranian Americans take the census, the more influential our community becomes. 3) Economic uses: Businesses and corporations depend on accurate and reliable ethnic data for market research and economic expansion. 4) Research uses: Social scientists, journalists and other researchers rely on census and ACS data to

¹³³ This concept takes from Omi and Winant’s classic work first published in 1986 on race in American society, which was influential for seeing race as made through a dynamic historical process of social construction rather than a static or strictly biological thing (Omi & Winant, 1994).

study ethnic population groups, demographic trends, and economic and educational mobility.¹³⁴

The aims of documentation, “recognition,” “influence,” and the countering of “discrimination” against Iranian Americans are central here. The census is one of the ways used to make Iranian American seen and heard as a minority group. Doing fieldwork, I encountered various concerns from my respondents and other Iranian Americans about the (in)visibility of Iranian Americans as a group in the US – not being counted or seen as a distinct ethnic group. Claiming racial difference on the census was aimed to remedy this. It also started discussions that included my respondents that covered issues of organized ethnic and racial (under-)representation of Iranian Americans. This raised questions for me about how my second-generation respondents position themselves within this shift towards increased claims to recognition, and in particular the shift towards collective claims to the racial difference of Iranian Americans.

The circulation of digital videos like the humorous “PSA” mentioned earlier suggests that the second generation and the use of web applications play important roles in the changing experiences and notions of race among many Iranian Americans. It also raises a second set of questions concerning the role of the use of web applications. How do my respondents use web applications in ways that have to do with race? How does this reflect the ways they want to be seen? How does it respond to existing racialized media representations of Iranian Americans, Middle Easterners and/or Muslim Americans? And how do uses of particular web applications play a role in processes of racialization among these young people? I largely rely on blogs that my respondents administer and/or contribute as an important form of web usage in these discussions of self-representation.

¹³⁴ See NIAC’s promotional brochure for the whole text Iranian American Census Project “It’s in our Hands; Stand up and be counted”
http://www.niacouncil.org/images/PDF_files/census%202010%20brochure%20english..pdf (accessed 29/11/14)

It has been suggested that representing race and racialized bodies is more prevalent with the rise of Web 2.0 compared to previous, less advanced web applications (Nakamura, 2007). This moves discussions of race and internet away from an understanding focused on the absence of bodily cues (see Chon, 1999) “online” as opposed to “offline” and towards a more complex understanding of the relationship between web usage and (representation of) bodies. The ways my respondents use web applications includes a variety of Web 2.0’s possibilities, through which bodies are reframed and represented. This chapter focuses on the many ways of using internet to engage with (subverting, resisting, and appropriating) racialized ways of seeing and being seen. I see race as an important part of how my respondents’ web use in the current context of awareness about racial difference and experiences with discrimination.

It is also important to note that with the changing landscape of racism in the US, claims to racial difference are at once officially incorporated through classificatory systems like the census uses, while a post-race shift toward the redundancy of racial differences neutralizes such claims.¹³⁵ Paradoxically, the post-race color-blindness that makes racism itself invisible and obscure is at work at the same moment in which this racialized minority is thrust into heightened visibility.¹³⁶ For many of my respondents, much of this problem of racial invisibility also revolves around the problematic relationship that Iranian Americans have (had) with being subsumed into whiteness. I use Seshadri-Crooks’ approach to whiteness and race, which sees race as a regime of seeing the body (2000). This informs my understanding of my respondents’ engagements with changing notions of racialized

¹³⁵ For perspectives on the workings of contemporary American and Western European racism that foreground this shift towards a so-called post-racial world that denies racism as a problem (or a problem only of a past when racism was exercised through overt violence) see for instance Lentin & Titley (2011), Bonilla-Silva, (2011), and Goldberg, (2009).

¹³⁶ The election of President Barak Obama as the US’ first black president has sparked this post-racial framing of the debate of racial discrimination in the US quite clearly. The fact that this is a president who has furthered military intervention and sanctions in the Middle East under the banner of the “war on terror,” national security, and democracy has complicated implications for the position of Middle Easterners in the US. Securitization and militarism are *not about* race. But their consequences take shape along racial lines on a regional scale, which carries over to experiences of racial discrimination in the US, to which numerous examples from my respondents in testify.

difference with the help of their web usage, particularly for the purposes of self-representation.

In the first section of this chapter I discuss how whiteness is rejected and racial difference claimed in ways that are seen as contrasting with the first generation's practices. In the second section I discuss some of the divergences within the second generation as to how and under which circumstances such racial difference is and can be claimed with the use of digital media. In the third and final section, I discuss the gendered aspects of racialization that emerged as a significant part of my respondents' stories and practices. In the course of discussing these various practices, I argue that my respondents present their narratives of discrimination and race with emphasis on certain unchanging characteristics located in their bodies. I also show how they appropriate certain styles of claiming and framing these bodily differences so as to make them a source of inclusion and even sometimes challenge the racial categories they use.

Visibly different

From whitewashing to wealth-washing

The collective memory of the Iran hostage crisis that started in Tehran in November 1979 remains a salient one among LA Iranians. My respondents recalled this as a time of discrimination and alienation of Iranians in the US. Some described direct recollections of this period from their early childhoods, while others were made aware of it through narratives passed down from older relatives and friends. Stories of social exclusion, vandalism, and violence against individuals, their property, and their families, were recounted about this period. The period was also revived in Iranian American director, Babak Shokrian's film, *America So Beautiful*. The film is set in LA during the hostage crisis.

First released in 2001, its screening in 2009 in West LA by the Levantine Cultural Center - with the director's presence for discussion following - spoke to the film's sustained resonance. And so, too, did the well-filled theatre of people attending this screening. The audiences were largely of Middle Eastern appearance and included some members of the Iranian American second generation. The film tells the story of a young Iranian man who immigrated to LA in the 70s and became drawn in by the promise and glamour of the LA disco scene. This became an escape from his everyday life of working at his uncle's Iranian grocery store. In light of the worsening American perceptions about Iranians at the time, the film includes a nod to how techniques of racial covering through name-changing and misrepresenting one's national background in the face of discrimination play into the main characters' techniques for being included into American society during this tense period.¹³⁷

The backdrop of the hostage crisis is evident in the film almost entirely through the American news coverage during this period. Television screens and radio reports covering the affair subtly but repeatedly find their way into the main characters' lives at meaningful moments in the story. It was also this media coverage that many of my respondents reported awareness of. Indeed, media scholarship on the period and its consequences for the lives of Iranian Americans has highlighted the great significance of American news media coverage. According to Sreberny-Mohammadi, the coverage "equalled and even surpassed average nightly coverage of the Vietnam war" (A. Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1995). The vast media coverage of the event was dominated by an ABC network television show entitled "The Iran Crisis – America Held Hostage: Day xxx,"¹³⁸ which would begin each program with the number of days the crisis had been ongoing, and presenting an update on the events every evening at 11.30pm (Mahdavi, 2005). The show would "broadcast scenes from outside the Embassy in Tehran, where the crowd burned and trampled American flags, waved fists, and chanted "Death to America... it was against this backdrop that most Americans formed their perceptions of Iran and Iranian Americans," writes Mahdavi. The

¹³⁷ See the extensive work that Betty Blair has conducted on personal name-changing by Iranian Americans in the US, which I return to later in the context of class and racial categorizations in the US (Blair, 1991).

¹³⁸ The show later became *Nightline*.

consequences immediately following the hostage-taking included the US government taking action that affected Iranians living in the US.

On November 13, 1979, Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti, issued regulations requiring post-secondary students who were in the US to submit special proof of their continued eligibility for student visa status. Failure to comply with the regulation subjected students to deportation... During the period in which the regulation was in effect, 57,000 Iranian students were screened regarding their legality, 7,177 deportation hearings were held, and 3,088 Iranians were ordered deported (Mahdavi, 2005: 216).

Tehrani additionally draws attention to the state-level measures that were taken against Iranians in the US and in particular Iranian students at American universities (see (Tehrani, 2008). Mahdavi describes this as a time when Iranian Americans went from “a position of obscurity in the US community to one of notoriety for holding hostage the citizens of one of the most powerful countries in the world” (2005: 243). This shift signals the stark increase in a negative form of visibility for Iranian Americans as a group in the US. Sreberny-Mohammadi argues that the role of US television news media during the Iran hostage crisis played a significant role in framing events in terms that created harmful stereotypes about Iranians and shaped the experience of Iranians in the US (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1995; see also Keshishian, 2000).

As depicted in Shokrian’s film, *America So Beautiful*, the response of many Iranian Americans to this increasingly tense atmosphere was strategies of racial covering. The term, “whitewashing,” was applied by several of those I spoke with. This was used to refer, with hindsight, to the practice of covering Iranian American-ness by attempting to “pass” for white or to try to be indistinguishable from the American racial majority. Whitewashing was a term I heard many times, used in slightly different ways. The term seemed central to how many Iranian Americans of the second generation gave meaning to their relationship with being racialized in the US.

John Tehranian, second generation Iranian American author, lawyer, and public figure among Iranian Americans in LA, uses the notion of whitewash centrally in his book, *Whitewash: America's invisible Middle Eastern minority*. In the book, Tehranian highlights the legal ways in which Iranian Americans, as part of a wider category of Middle Easterners, have been subsumed under the category of white (rather making up an ethnic/racial minority) in the US, and also shows how Iranian Americans have been willingly allowing themselves to be racially categorized in this way and why. He writes of contemporary Middle Eastern Americans:

[R]esponding to the rising tide of discrimination, many Middle Eastern Americans have embraced whiteness and assimilation through the strategic implementation of covering tactics involving association, appearance, affiliation, and activism that downplays their ethnicity or race. In the short term they have benefited from such strategies, which enable them to opt out of the less factored racial category and all its accompanying hardships. Yet this tactic has also left Middle Easterner Americans at the margins of the civil rights movement and with little collective social or political force (2008).

Tehranian outlines whitewashing as a problem. Not only does it alienate Middle Eastern Americans from historical struggles in the US the rights of racial minorities, but it also has not worked as a means to protect Iranian Americans against discrimination as the post-9/11 backlash has shown. Elsewhere in the book, however, Tehranian states that the second generation is signalling a shift away from practices of racial covering.

[T]he younger generation of Iranian Americans is much more likely than prior generations to not only eschew covering techniques but to celebrate actively their ethnicity and even insist on their non-whiteness (2008: 87).

This is precisely what characterizes the positioning of many of my respondents. Yet Tehranian's work does not elaborate on the processes behind, or consequences of, this generational shift. Tehranian describes a top-down process of "selective racialization"

effecting Iranians and other Middle Easterners. It is described as a tendency not to see the Middle Eastern backgrounds of accomplished public figures, while conversely seeing this background as central to the identities of social actors engaging in transgressive behaviour. In other words, selective racialization takes place when Iranian Americans who are successful are not explicitly identified by themselves or others as Iranian American or this is simply circumstantial, but Iranian-ness is explicitly named when the Iranian American is a criminal, for instance (i.e. difference is made explicit only in a negative sense). Tehranian argues that this tendency not to see someone's Middle Eastern-ness (or racial difference) as relevant if they are successful (but to see it as relevant information when they are an offender of some kind) actually exacerbates and perpetuates people's own practices of racial covering. When being Middle Eastern (and therefore racially different) is dissociated from being from successful in American society, then people might try not to be seen as Middle Eastern *in order* to become successful.

Tehranian and others who have focused on the law in the US point to cases in which Middle Easterners (Arab Americans in particular) historically made claims to whiteness as a means to equal inclusion. They did this in a context where non-white American residents were denied access to citizenship, and they did this in a country where each new immigrant group gained privileges from being included into white American-ness. Hence, on the one hand whitewashing is a phenomenon that Iranian Americans have historically perpetuated themselves and benefited from as means to inclusion into white American nationhood. But on the other hand Iranian Americans also suffer from and are limited by whitewashing. According to several of my respondents, as well as increasing numbers of Iranian Americans, whitewashing denotes (an attempt at) inclusion on the wrong terms. Embracing (rather than covering) Iranian American difference, including racial difference, is considered the more just and effective option.

Upon entering young adulthood some of my respondents said they began to realise that the practice of changing one's name to sound Western - which was familiar among Iranian Americans in their surroundings - was a technique of covering difference that was reflected

this kind of inclusion on the wrong terms. Name-changing is something Tehranian writes about as well, along with labelling oneself as “Persian” instead of “Iranian.”

A classic form of covering occurs when you ask an Iranian-American about their ethnicity. Often, they will respond “Persian,” not Iranian. The reason is easy to understand. Persia evokes images of an ancient empire, a proud history, magnificent rugs (and cats), and a rich culture. Iran, by contrast, evokes images of the hostage crisis, the Axis of Evil, radical fundamentalism, jihad and fatwas (2008: 83).

For young people I spoke with who were developing an awareness around the meanings of naming and labelling practices, name-changing and avoiding being called “Iranian” is a lingering practice associated with whitewashing. This is a practice that is oftentimes not framed in terms of race and racism (or avoidance thereof), but instead in terms of convenience or simple preference to adapt. However, for many of those who were critical of this practice, there was a connection to the first generation’s practices of racial covering in a context of discrimination against Iranians in the US. Indeed, racial covering was seen in large part by my respondents as a remnant of this tense period in the US. They pointed out how the atmosphere had changed since the time around the Iran hostage crisis.

Shahdad, a college graduate in his 30s, notices changes since the time of the hostage crisis and the discrimination the first generation experienced. Among a group of peers, he recalled an event in which his uncle’s car was vandalized by people in the LA neighbourhood where he lived. Shahdad reflects on the differences between that time and the present LA in which young Iranians like himself live.

There weren’t as many Iranians back then. It’s interesting to see how [we are] growing up in society and how white people view [us]. [Before] white people would say like, they’re terrorists, they’re Arabs. Very negative things.¹³⁹ Now the

¹³⁹ I return to the issue of anti-Arab sentiment and the positioning of my respondents later on in the chapter. Here, I interpret the meaning of this statement as referring to being generalized about as Arab Americans because of the stereotypes that Arabs have been burdened with in the context of relatively recent association

conversation's really different. It's like, Iranians are very family-oriented. They're rich, they're educated, or snobby, or stuck up. It's interesting to see how the dynamics have changed.

Shahdad's comment reflects the experience of a generation growing up and dealing with new stereotypes that have emerged over a period of Iranian Americans establishing a strong and increasingly visible presence in LA. Indeed, there are elements of this experience that are likely to be specific to living and growing up in LA, given that California is exceptional in the US for its immigrant demographic, and because "the pace of demographic change is even more intense in an immigrant metropolis such as Los Angeles" (Alba & Nee, 2005: 9). The changes Shahdad refers to indicate a decline in the tensions around stereotypes of the past based on tense events inside Iran, and a shift towards a new, more local stereotype; one of Iranian Americans as wealthy and privileged. Virtually all my respondents were aware of this way of being seen as LA Iranians by others.¹⁴⁰ They often expressed uncertainty as to whether this was a positive or a negative stereotype, and most often did not see it as applying to them.

From the hostage crisis-perpetrators to rich, LA snobs, the images of Iranian Americans have shifted as have the televised media representations. In 2012 this shift became most apparent with the release of the long-anticipated television show, *Shahs of Sunset*. This new reality show on cable television broadcaster, *Bravo*, focuses on the lives of five wealthy "Persians" in LA and is broadcast nationally. The initial plans and casting class for the show and certainly its first airing early in 2012 sparked much debate.¹⁴¹ Discussion involved Iranian American observers, but also drew coverage by publications like the New York

with terrorism. The phrase may also refer to ignorance about the fact that Iranians do not make up the linguistic region commonly referred to as the Arab world because Iranians speak Persian.

¹⁴⁰ Some who grew up outside the city also help this stereotype about Iranians living in LA, and expressed surprise as to how accurate these stereotypes could sometimes be.

¹⁴¹ One of the main reasons why this show was able to cause such opposition even before its casting was due to it being made on the model of an earlier program by the same network called *Jersey Shore*, show known internationally for its low brow entertainment factor and portrayals of negative stereotypes associated with the descendants of Italian immigrants to the US. The show was also an extreme success on MTV where it first aired.

Times, Los Angeles Times, and CNN. Years prior to this show's release, the concern about the representations of "LA Persians" in line with existing stereotypes¹⁴² about their flamboyant consumption, investment in appearances, abundant wealth, and party-oriented lifestyles permeated discussions that concerned Iranian Americans. These included communications via web-based ones on Iranian.com¹⁴³ as well as conversations face to face.

The controversy around the plans to make the show were revealing of how contested mainstream representations of Iranian Americans are and how much is at stake to people when it comes to how Iranian American are/should be seen - politically, morally, and socially.¹⁴⁴ Some initial fears were that a focus on the lives of a few prosperous, young LA socialites¹⁴⁵ would cover and thus perpetuate the problems and consequences of racialization and discrimination of Iranian Americans in the context of post-9/11 America, a problem I discuss more elaborately later in this chapter. Hence, the concern that some expressed around the show, *Shahs*, was about what one might call a concern about "wealth-washing;" or an attempt at covering of racial difference through wealthy middle-class inclusion.

¹⁴² With the show's release, these concerns were not immediately appeased by its content. However, it was interesting to see that the show's premise explicitly framed a tension between extravagant lifestyles and family obligations. From Shahdad's quote mentioned earlier in this section, and according to recurrent other statements from respondents, the family orientation of Iranian Americans is another strong association and stereotype that is mentioned as prevailing about Iranian Americans. The show seems to deploy them in combination, placing them side by side in tension.

¹⁴³ As a gauge for the level of widespread attention for the controversy about this show, I should note that the blog posting I wrote about this issue received the highest number of hits of my other postings I placed on Iranian.com and I was even contacted by a journalist working for the Amserica.gov, a news site run by the US State Department that covered the controversy around the show well before its launch.

¹⁴⁴ Not only entertainment but the international news coverage of Iranians in LA has also tended to focus on the great amounts of wealth, education, and entrepreneurship among Iranian Americans who migrated from Iran during the 80s. For one of the most recent examples see coverage on BBC news magazine: Amirani, Shoku, "Tehrangeles: How Iranian Americans made part of LA their own," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-19751370> (accessed 29/11/14)

¹⁴⁵ Later on in the chapter I discuss it is precisely the economic inequalities (lack of wealth) that this "wealthwashing" in fact leads to obscuring.

The changing visibility of Iranians discussed here is shaped in particular by local/national narratives about Iranians. However, as mentioned, there are parallels with Arab American populations. There are also important parallels to Brodtkin's work on Jewish immigrants (from Europe) in US, which argues that race was in part shaped by the kind of work immigrants did and the professional and income status they came to hold, such that whiteness was synonymous with living a middle-class life while the working-class was excluded from white American-ness (Brodtkin, 1998). Brodtkin describes Jews in America (whose racial categorization, much like Iranian Americans, has long been ambivalent in the US) as being excluded from the white side of the race binary in the US because of the strong association of Jewishness with working-class culture and socialist politics before WWII (1998).

This can be understood in conjunction with Blair's research on Iranian American name-changing practices, which argues that the higher the income and wealth status of Iranian Americans around the early 1990s, the less likely they were to change their names from Iranian ones to European/American-sounding ones (Blair, 1991). This paints a picture of American whiteness being extended to (upper) middle-class immigrants while being denied to poorer and working-class ethnic groups, or parts of such ethnic groups.¹⁴⁶ With differentiations along class lines, racialization is thus not uniformly experienced by all Iranian Americans. The absence of access to whiteness through middle-class culture can mean racial covering in other ways (such as name-changing).

The positioning of my respondents with regard to the collective visibility of Iranian Americans traces an arc between past and present racialization of Iranians in the US. It is also placed within shifting media spheres especially including both television and cinema representations of racialized Iranian Americans. Most recently, the inclusion of Iranian Americans as a discrete ethnic group (however selectively represented) in mass broadcast television programming has reinforced the notion of an increasingly racially and ethnically

¹⁴⁶ See also Maldonado on the racialization of labor (2009).

diverse American mainstream. However, it has also raised concerns among some about the terms on which that inclusion is taking (or should take) place. I have laid out this brief account of contemporary racialization of Iranian Americans in order to contextualize the following discussion of second-generation practices of internet usage, and to help to explain the significance of my respondents' web use to reconfigure how they are seen.

Seen as different: appropriating racialization

Asa and her older brother attended high school in Beverly Hills when they first arrived with their parents in the US as youngsters in the late 1980s. She described the experience the two had upon moving to the affluent LA neighbourhood after her family left Iran as refugees.¹⁴⁷ Asa spoke in particular about the painful experience her brother initially had with not being able to fit in. "We went to Beverly (Hills high school). He wasn't good-looking. Although he's very good looking, but not in that sense – you know, we're Iranian, we're hairy, big noses." Asa described her own social and outgoing nature as part of her survival skills in that socially difficult time. She noticed that her brother in contrast experienced exclusion because of "looking Iranian." She described her own strategies of overcoming or deflating the negative effects of being different by embracing her difference, accepting herself, and using it as a source of confidence. This attitude carries over to the increasingly public persona Asa has more recently taken on. To her young fans she is something of a role model for embracing one's difference, and in particular physical particularities.

Accounts of exclusion based on physical attributes were recounted by many of my respondents. These tend to be framed as childhood memories of discrimination. An account of such an experience appears in Firouzeh Dumas' popular memoir of growing up as a second generation Iranian American in Orange County, California. In the book, *Funny in*

¹⁴⁷ Asa's family moved first from Iran to Hamburg, Germany before they moved to Beverly Hills. She spent her childhood there until the age of 11 before her family moved to California.

Farsi, she makes reference to the painful teasing she experienced at the hands of her classmates in primary school for the shape of her nose. The account is part of an idiosyncratic and humorous story of an upbringing in the US from the viewpoint of the child of immigrant parents.¹⁴⁸ In one of the book's later chapters, "A Nose by Any Other Name," Dumas returns to the nose issue, this time as an adult, and presents it in terms of a national obsession of Iranians with noses and "nose jobs." This is presented as an obsession she makes personal efforts to overcome, offering a story about the importance of confidence.

Like Firouzeh Dumas, Asa incorporates her own personal experiences with discrimination and being seen as different from a young age to help address experiences of exclusion on the part of today's young people growing up Iranian in the US. And like Dumas, Asa engages with her audience through her own blog as well as coverage by a variety of different other websites publicizing their creative work. Asa was featured in a blog post on the design blog Pinar&Viola, in which she told the story of her experience of being seen as different. In the blog entry, Asa shares her memories of how she felt growing up in the "Iranian Diaspora":

Up until I was a teenager, I lived with my family in the immigrant ghetto of Hamburg (before German unification). The general political climate in Germany was very active in the 80s with the lefts and German punks on one side and the neo-Nazis and skinheads on the other. As immigrants, our days were filled with the struggles of hatred and racism, and thereby our lives were in a continuous state of resistance and uprising...

A couple of years after the Berlin Wall went down, the situation for refugees took a turn for the worse and my parents decided it was time to move again, this time to Los Angeles. In the 1980s, Beverly Hills had become an affluent Mecca for the Iranian Diaspora. My family was no longer affluent, and did not become so in

¹⁴⁸ The book also describes the many ways she and her family stumble over being Iranian American as newcomers to the US, and the ways she sees her parents as awkward, embarrassing, and atypical from the young age of seven and the ways she negotiates her own Iranian American-ness as she grows.

America. I grew up in the margins of this society – in the slums of Beverly Hills, so to speak...

The ASAsin Manifesto is the outline of a politics of identity. It is a personal reflection on the current state of affairs in the US and in the world. Over the past years, our ability to think critically has been repeatedly put to the test. In the aftermath of violent strikes on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the world is experiencing the onset of a new era of permanent war against real and invented enemies of the American Empire. The media has bombarded us with propaganda and manipulated the emotions of the people, causing more hatred and perpetuating violence... My politics are personal and this is my story.

In these quotes for the blog, Asa speaks about her youth being shaped by “racism,” “living in the margins,” and being an “immigrant” to an international blog audience.¹⁴⁹ Exclusion appears a constant in her youth throughout her family’s moves from Iran to Europe to North America. This is an experience that she holds on to, reflects upon, and makes part of herself by including it in this personal, blogged “manifesto.” From the vantage point of adulthood, Asa’s statement reflects on, shares, and (re)frames her childhood stories of exclusion. The blog posting itself features a series of posed, full-body color photographs of Asa in different outfits and in different settings, as well as the embedded video of her song *Fesenjoon* and other photographs and music videos. The multiple photographic and video representations leave a clear image on the viewer of the young woman’s physical appearance in a way that struck me as entirely congruent with her “offline” face-to-face persona; colourful, extravagant, decorated, sensual/erotic, confident, and attractive with her long black hair and brown skin complementing the bright colors around her, and her (often sexualized) body is central to these self-representations.

¹⁴⁹ The “propaganda” Asa mentions points to the problem of racialized post-9/11 media representations. However, both her and Duma’s experiences in (high) school are recollections from a pre-9/11 childhood.

The text and photo content she consistently posts on Instagram show or make reference to her body. And while many of these fit into glamour ideals of feminine beauty, she often uses her Instagram descriptions to frame her body as “curvy” and therefore different than mainstream beauty ideals.¹⁵⁰ She also uses iconography to highlight her Middle Easternness, especially in the photo and video art pieces she showed me and I saw on blogs and social media sites, often invoking images of the hijab, militancy, Farsi script, hefty amounts of gold jewellery and dark eye makeup, and sexualised body parts. In Asa and Firouzeh’s cases, the claim to difference is a critical appropriation of the remembered experience of being seen as different by others from a young age and making creative work and styling themselves in part by using that experience.

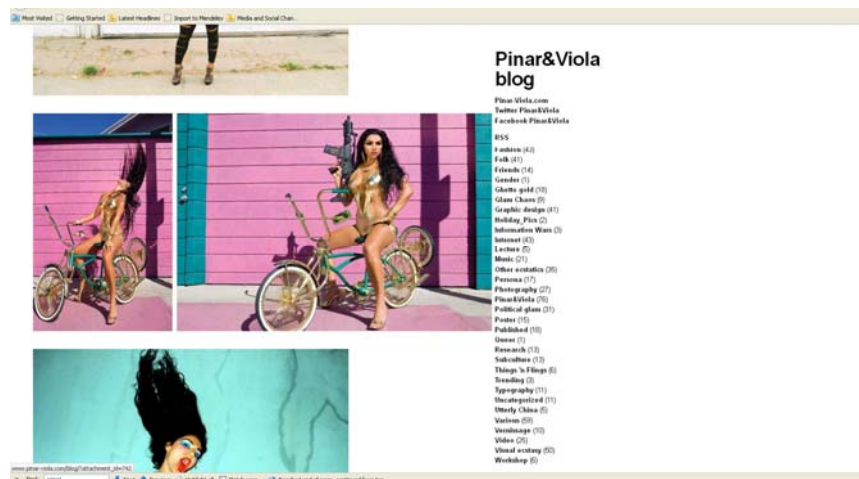


Figure 6 Screenshot from the blog posting about Asa on the Pinar and Viola blog¹⁵¹ (posting from February 8, 2011)

¹⁵⁰ From her Instagram account in July 2014: “skinny is not something I strive to be. I’m happy with my body,” Soltan Rahmati, Asa, <http://instagram.com/p/qxZ8s0TJSH/> (accessed 29/11/14)

¹⁵¹ A blog by two female artist/designers based in Amsterdam, which mainly showcases their own work but also the music and art of others.



Figure 7 Photo of a piece of Asa's work that she showed me when I visited her apartment and which has been posted and reposted to various of her social media profiles since

Asa's sharing about and claiming of difference seems effortless, both in person and in the blog posting in question. But the topic of racial discrimination was not one discussed as openly by all my respondents. The topic as experienced by young Iranian Americans was dealt with on the occasion of a roundtable discussion meeting convened one evening among a group of second generation students on campus as part of a Iranian American student conference called, "Knowledge is Power." A wide range of experiences with, and personal approaches to, everyday racial discrimination were recounted by participants who spoke in turn; some meeting one another for the first time, a few already familiar. At one point, a student spoke up to describe her childhood experience of being placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class despite having been born and raised in the US. It was an experience that still affected her in college, she told us, as it made her doubt her own abilities.

At the end of the roundtable meeting, Pouneh, a long-time student organizer, lamented that the discussion about discrimination was rarely engaged among Iranian Americans, despite the energetic conversation that night. "I loved this discussion... [it's] definitely something that, as a community, we're kinda missing," she said to the group in closing. Pouneh also bemoaned the lack of support from larger sponsors (Iranian American organizations) in

the coordination of meetings like this one dealing with issues that ordinary young Iranian Americans are faced with. To her, that evening's discussion and her broader experience indicated that these issues were evidently relevant to young people around her. A few others expressed this same lack among Iranian Americans around them when it came to speaking about issues of race and creating spaces where that is possible. Based on the student reactions that night, the silence appears to be sustained by worries that naming discrimination explicitly leads to further exclusion, self-victimization, reinforcement of racial categories and ways of seeing, and the creation of angry and cantankerous images of Iranian Americans as a group.

Despite the relative general reluctance to talk about racism, the stories shared that night discussed experiences of being seen as different, not because of the immigrant newcomer's difficulties with language or unfamiliarity with customs, nor with being marked by one's accented speech, nor "cultural" quirks in the eyes of others, nor lack of familiarity with values/norms. It was not the kind of difference that would dissipate over time through an ambition to "adapt." In other words, it was not the kind of difference that the first generation might deal with. Rather, while those conditions did not apply to the cases of these young people, their stories instead reflected a tendency to locate difference in one's own appearance, look, and body, even from a young age. And this permanent difference is generalized to the whole "community."

In this way, the second generation's position lays bare the racial logic underpinning the exclusion of immigrants on the basis of (an essentialized) "cultural" difference. There is a similarity here to research on Asian Americans, which argued that even into third or fourth generation Japanese and Chinese Americans, "being ethnic" is a consistent expectation (Min & Kim, 2000). However, this racial logic, Lentin and Titley explain, has never separated natural from the cultural differences; "race naturalizes and classifies the cultural attributes of human groups, ordering those deemed inferior and superior..." (2011: 68). Seen in this way, difference takes on a new permanence, one that is grounded in markers that are seen and therefore experienced as unchanging and fixed in the body. While the construction of

racial groups developed vis a vis class categories and notions of middle-class, mainstream, American-ness, racial discourses naturalize difference as a truth. By emphasizing its bodily manifestations, racial difference is claimed by representing experiences of this difference, including through blogs, as part of a collective experience of growing up Iranian American.

Web use makes it possible for some to blog about these experiences as well as allowing the author to include visual representation of her own racialized body. Such a use of internet develops alongside new and burgeoning social spaces for discussion about racism experienced by young Iranian Americans - and naming it that. For those discussed here, these visual differences are appearances that are managed, contended with, and reframed. While Firoozeh Dumas' writing also paid attention to the embrace of difference and modes of being seen while growing up in the US, blog writing and social media has the added potential of adding visual self-representations. It affords the (re-)framing of visual representations. This emphasis on the visual has consequences are for those Iranian Americans who are not seen as racially different; i.e. appear white to others. In the following, I discuss the various approaches among a few of my respondents in their experiences of being seen as white -- against their own desires -- by various parties in their midst.

Subverting one's whiteness

Shiva says her aunt and other older relatives admire her light complexion and hair color. But their compliments and attention are off-putting to her. She describes feeling uncomfortable being appreciated for attributes over which she has no control. And she expresses an uncomfortable awareness of the beauty ideals associated with whiteness in such encounters. She associates these ideals with her older relatives and their generation and she expresses her own dissatisfaction with this veneration of whiteness. Her comments echo those of several others from the second generation who position themselves against what they see as persistent notions - especially among older Iranian Americans - of latent

racism and aspiration to physical features of whiteness. Shiva's experience is echoed in the writing of author Jasmin Darznik (child of Iranian mother and American father who grew up in Orange County) on Iranian.com, when she shares a short piece about her own experiences with her physical attributes.

To illustrate, among my parents' set, there has always been a clearly delineated hierarchy of Iranian beauty that, not coincidentally, takes as its ideal typically European features. A brief list of such coveted physical attributes would have to include fair skin, light hair, small nose, slim physique, and "colored" eyes, with the highest value placed on blue eyes, then green, and then hazel. Rarely did all these come together in one person (they certainly did not all come together in me for me to feel their force), but they didn't have to. A set of blue eyes, for example, carried unlimited mileage on an otherwise unremarkable face. One of my own relatives, a homely woman in all other respects, had from childhood been lavishly praised for her alabaster skin. Now well into middle age, she continues to indulge the most supreme pride in her farangi-like complexion and has taken to gazing approvingly at my very similar pallor.

I see only ugliness in all this. While I can't say if it's an unconscious revolt to this troubling hierarchy of beauty (would that one could harness desire into calculated protest!), the fact is that my own evolving aesthetic favors the darker Middle Eastern and Mediterranean type.

Both Shiva and Jasmin in their own ways problematize the praise they receive for having some of the physical attributes of whiteness. And they see this favouring of whiteness as an "ugly" practice associated more closely with an older generation of Iranians. Iranian.com, with its broad audience, is used by Jasmin to develop an alternative way of being seen through her writing – one that opposes racially tinted hierarchies.

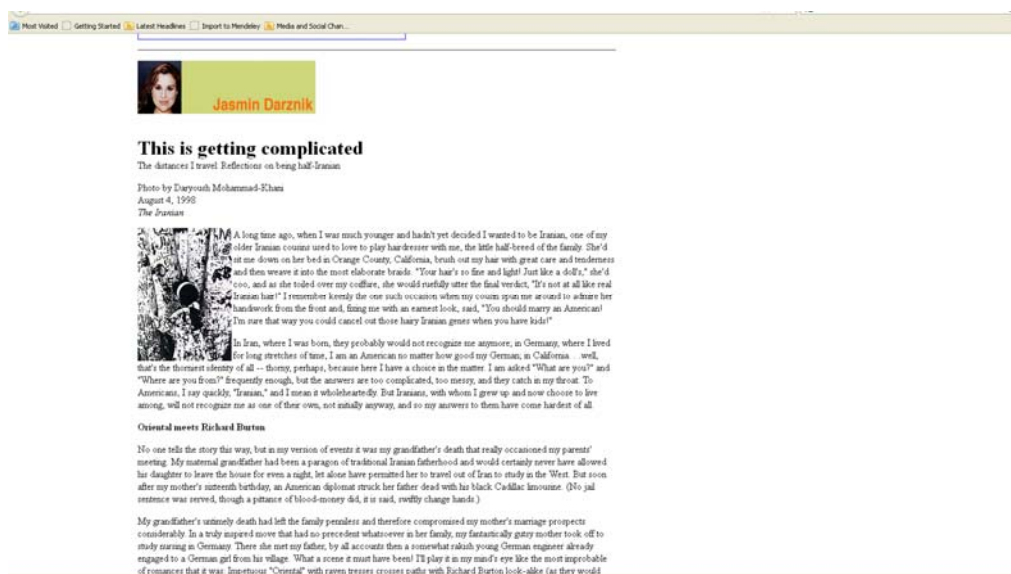


Figure 1 Jasmin Darznik's contribution on Iranian.com from August 4, 1998, screenshot from January 2010

Others brought up how similar racial hierarchies are reproduced more broadly in the US, implicating Iranians with respect to other ethnic groups they live and work around. For instance Hakkha states that “[Iranian Americans] have an easier time than Indians even though Indians are actually even further up on the professional ladder in many areas - given that so many Indian-origin immigrants are a predominant presence in Silicon Valley and their numbers in LA are even larger than Iranians. Still, they are not looked upon in the same way as Iranians – not as positively.” Hakkha adds, “It does make a difference that their shading is different. Skin color does still makes a difference everywhere, and here you’ll see that because Iranians can more often look white, they are seen as more equal [with whites] in that hierarchy.” Hakkha is critical of the way Iranians may stand to benefit unfairly in the US based on their racialized appearances. However, it was common knowledge among a number of my respondents that such hierarchies are also perpetuated by Iranians themselves. Iranian racism towards African Americans was one concern for them. The self-awareness about this problem among some Iranian Americans was made

evident by a YouTube video¹⁵² that emerged and was shared by a number of my respondents in 2012, as well as a few prominent Iranian American public figures. The video depicted a young, gossiping Iranian American woman who is sitting on a park bench next to a young black man about whom she is making racially prejudiced comments about in Persian on her cell phone to her aunt. She is surprised by the man when he starts speaking Persian to her, revealing that he understood her conversation about him and that he is also “Persian.”

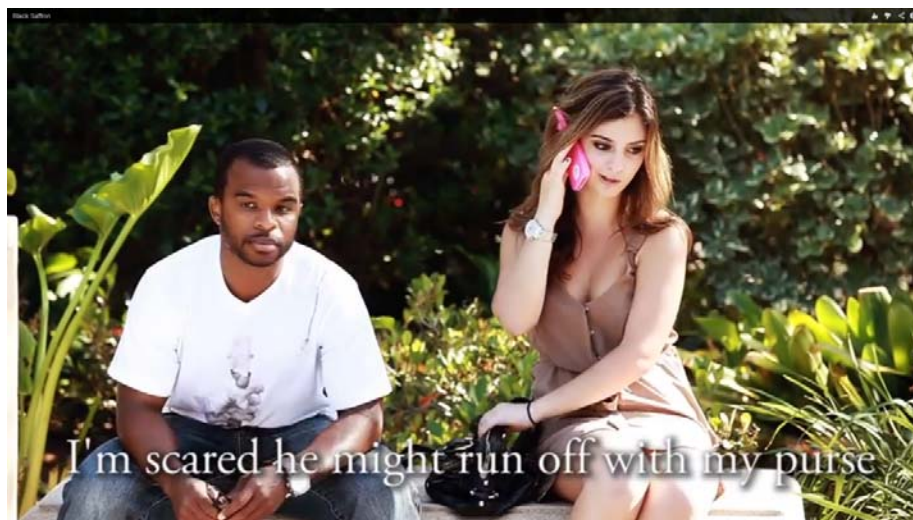


Figure 8 Screenshot from YouTube video, "Black Saffron" screenshot from May, 2012

Taking my respondents' comments and the emergence of these digital media productions together, the parallels between racism among Iranian Americans (often attributed to older relatives) follows the racial hierarchies at work within wider American society. The racialized beauty ideals deployed by Shiva's older relatives to privilege certain attributes of her physical appearance is mirrored in Hakha's description of a racial hierarchy implicating Iranian Americans among other immigrant groups. Both relate critically to the aspiration towards whiteness as the dominant and desirable way of being. And theirs and many others' comments denunciate of the privileged position that comes with some of the

¹⁵² Rugger Productions, "Black Saffron," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4mf0eq9101w> (accessed 29/11/14)

physical attributes of whiteness. This indicates their anti-racist stances, but basically rejects claims to the privileges of whiteness gained through “passing” for white.

This rejection of whiteness is particularly elucidated in Justin’s account. “My skin is pretty light. A lot of Iranians say they mistake me for an American,” says Justin in one of the opening shots of his documentary film, *Warring Factions*. As this voiceover plays, Justin can be seen pointing demonstratively to the skin on his upper arm. He is one of several second generation Iranian Americans I came across who have “mixed” backgrounds – Justin’s father is Iranian, and his mother is white American. In his documentary film, from which the above quote is taken, his own personal positioning as American, Iranian, and Muslim (terms he applied to himself in the film’s introduction) are central to the film’s investigation of Iranians’ and Americans’ perceptions of one another. Justin’s film does this in large part through the use of the popular international hip-hop dance genre called b-boying (or breakdancing/breaking) which he practices, and which features strongly in the film as he travels from his home in California to meet Iranian hip hop dancers who live in Tehran. As the title suggests, the personal story that the film tells is set against the sombre backdrop of hostility between the US and Iran (and the larger Muslim world).

One of the film’s scenes presents the backlash against Muslims and Middle Easterners in the US after 9/11. This is portrayed as a turning point in Justin’s life. It depicts a re-enactment of the moment of hearing the news of 9/11 within the setting of an impassioned classroom discussion in which he sits, feeling increasingly excluded by the comments around him, and ultimately walking away. In the film, we see Justin play with his white appearance as he attends a military air show in Flagstaff, Arizona. He interviews and records the sentiments of participants at the event about American military interventions in the Middle East, while not revealing his identification as either Iranian or Muslim during these exchanges. Like some other Iranian Americans I spoke with, his light complexion meant that Justin was categorically taken to be a white American. Like many members of the second generation, Justin’s speech and accent are indistinguishable from others born and raised in the US. “Passing” as white takes little if any effort. Yet, his film is concerned

with – and is itself part of – his various efforts to negotiate his multiple and overlapping self-categorizations and allegiances.

Justin sees his appearance as affording him something of an undercover status. He mentions that being seen with his wife is the thing that often gives him away. “She blows my cover,” he says jokingly. Justin’s wife is an Arab American young woman who wears a headscarf in accordance with her Islamic faith. Justin is clearly not bothered by his cover being blown, as the persona he cultivates through his blog, Mashouf TV, is one whose life is marked by experiences of discrimination at US border checks because of his travel history to Iran and the Iranian side of his family, this revealing both the connections he has to Iran and his practice of Islam, which are not immediately visible from his appearance. The experience of arduous border checks is also one that also features in his film and, as such, explicitly complicates his white appearance with his inclusion into the very common experience of increased or additional questioning in airports that became a common experience for Iranian Americans in the years after 9/11.

Justin chooses not to be taken for a white American, as is evident in the way he presents himself through his blog and his film. He complicates his appearance by using it to expose prejudices or misconceptions about Middle Easterners, even including a subtle comment about the prejudices with which some Iranian (Americans) have about Arabs and associations with “dark skin.” In the film, he frames this as a response to the tendency of “a lot of Iranians” to mistake him as being white. “Then I tell them that their dark skin made me mistake them for Arabs. That really pisses them off.” In the theatre in Beverly Hills at the film’s LA debut, many in the audience laughed out loud at this statement, and in my correspondence with him shortly afterwards, Justin expressed happiness at hearing people laughing at just the right moments in the LA screening.

Sepideh expressed a similar attitude about being mistaken for being white in her everyday interactions, especially with other Iranian Americans. Sepideh often has to explain to others that both of her parents are Iranian by origin. She has a fair complexion, and during our conversations, she repeatedly raised complaints about often being told by others that

she does not look Iranian. At one point, Sepideh commented that she sometimes prefers communicating with other Iranian Americans through internet media, for instance, through comment threads on websites or blogs. She has been active in using a variety of websites to engage with other Iranian Americans, and has noticed that in internet-mediated communications where she represented herself through only her name and with no reflection of her physical appearance, others had less reason to doubt or undermine her Iranian-ness, as her atypically light coloring and physical features did not generate the usual confusion or skepticism. Sepideh said that this allowed her to avoid a situation where she had to make an effort to be seen as Iranian as a ground for engaging with others from that position. This made her feel more comfortable and included.

Each in their own way, Sepideh and Justin use internet (combined with other) media to challenge being seen as white: Sepideh by hiding her physical attributes in certain exchanges, and Justin by pointing them out and explicitly redefining them. In this sense, avoiding or subverting whiteness, whether in order to denounce its validity as a basis for privilege, or as a source of exclusion from Iranian American-ness, is part of how these young people position themselves with the use of media. Internet becomes a part of personal and creative ways of presenting oneself within a wider shift towards claiming racial difference. Whether highlighted, reframed, or hidden, in one way or another, the way racialized bodies are seen is central to the ways in which internet media become involved in claiming difference.

The role of the body and the rise and development of the web has been discussed by some in terms of new forms of cyborg embodiment within cybernetic paradigms of tracing connections between the biological and digital (Hayles, 1999). Others dealing with “embodiment” in the context of digital media have emphasized the “virtual” as a transcendental field of potentiality where the possibilities for racialized bodies are explored (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012). In the examples of the uses of blogs I have discussed, the potentialities of digital media are indeed utilized for self-representation of racialized bodies – particularly the subversion of being seen as white – in conjunction with

other media. While engagement with one's own body through a range of digital representations (e.g. various written form, photographic, videographic) is important, my respondents seem not to be forming cyborg bodies or configuring racial difference in a separate, virtual realm. Rather, blog writing, commenting, and other production appears to allow them to produce self-representations in order to claim inclusion into Iranian-ness and American-ness. As I have described, whether seen as white or non-white, the racialized body is used as a central site to launch a positioning with respect to whiteness and Iranian-ness. In a context where racialization is beginning to be embraced and appropriated through representations of experiences of exclusion, my respondents engage in a nascent politics of racial positioning. This finds grounding in experiences that focus on the body and how it is seen by others, finding articulation in budding social spaces like a blog or and small-scale face-to-face discussion group.

White but not quite

My respondents seem to be positioned in the gap between the silence of the post-race, multicultural promise on the one hand, and the permanence of difference located in the body on the other. Some express the desire not to talk about racism, which is connected with fears of self-victimizing/weakness. Yet at the same Iranian Americans stand at the precipice of a significant shift towards making racial difference an important basis for collective claims to inclusion in the US. This shift is generational, particularly because it has to do with the racial covering or whitewashing of/by generations past (first-generation Iranian Americans, as well as older generations of other Middle Eastern immigrants to the US). It is under these circumstances that some of my respondents represent themselves as different, marginalized, and racialized – whether through a blog or a round-table discussion among fellow students/peers. By mobilizing difference in this way, they ascribe racial categories to themselves. Though it is also evident that their mobilization of non-whiteness puts some in a problematic situation when they do not have experiences of being seen as non-white. Rather, they express feeling excluded from Iranian-ness to some extent because

they pass as white. In certain instances (including of web usage), they try to reframe how they are seen in terms of (non-)whiteness, Iranian-ness and American-ness.

Some have warned that internet technologies cover racialized identities – and hence racial inequalities by default – by rendering the body invisible in internet communications (Chon, 1999). I have argued here that race is mediated through a regime of looking, exercised in everyday life. Far from making this regime disappear or irrelevant, my respondents' web usage reflects their broader desire to shape the ways they are seen by others. Lisa Nakamura has argued that it is more the omission of the language of race as part of a neoliberal discourse of racial color-blindness (Nakamura, 2007) that shapes how important race is for internet users. In other words, the importance of race is not a function of any automatic bodily invisibility/anonymity afforded by internet usage. In addition, she stresses that visually-oriented media have supplemented text as internet technologies have developed, making possibilities for bodily representations fare more elaborate.

I have followed this observation and shown that my respondents' textual productions are supplemented with digital photographs and video that amply referenced racialized Iranian American bodies. This allows young people to reframe and shift racial categories. As shown in this section, productions like blog- or website-postings were one of few channels shedding light on the apparently under-addressed but significant experiences around racialization for this young generation. These young people's second-generation status means that for them "being ethnic" is experienced as located largely in their appearance. As part of their adherence to anti-racism discourses in the US, they renounce the emulation of whiteness as a privilege bestowed through climbing racial hierarchies. They draw attention to how these hierarchies are at work in the discrimination they experience, as well as in the subtle praise that some of them receive for appearing to be (almost) white. In what follows I pay further attention to the variety of ways my respondents use web applications to position themselves with relation to race.

Shades of difference

Aryans

Everybody has heard about Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, the recent Walt Disney blockbuster featuring Jake Gyllenhaal in the role of...a prince of Persia. That a rather fair actor with Swedish and Ashkenazi heritage plays the lead role in a story set in ancient Iran caused a minor controversy. Some enlightened people believe that Hollywood missed an opportunity to transcend its stereotypical depictions of non-Europeans, particularly Middle Easterners, by offering the part to a brownish hero. Of course, in private discussions, many Iranians, always prompt to portray themselves as "Aryans," concurred that Gyllenhaal accurately embodies how their ancestors must have looked, before Arabs invaded and imposed both their religion and complexion at the point of the sword.

So far, nothing unusual. What is surprising and alarming, however, is that serious intellectuals condoned these views. Asked to comment on producer Jerry Bruckheimer's declaration to The Times of London that many Iranians were "blond and blue-eyed" until "the Turks kinda changed everything," American-Iranian author Reza Aslan asserted that, indeed, Iranians were Aryans. "If we went back in time 1,700 years to the mythological era," Aslan said, "all Iranians would look like Jake Gyllenhaal." This pronouncement highlights the resilience of what I call the "Aryan syndrome" in modern Iran. A historical detour is necessary to show why it is so problematic.

The above text was the opening to a blog posting in which Pouya, a second generation blogger from Orange County (whose site is visited by some of my other respondents), linked to on his blog. The piece was written by the London based scholar, Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, and originally posted by Tehran Bureau under the title *Iranian Identity, the 'Aryan Race,' and Jake Gyllenhaal*. Other respondents also linked to the piece via their own Facebook pages or posted it to friends' pages. To those I spoke with, the film constituted a high profile case of "whitewashing." This label was used in coverage by Iranian American

bloggers and other (entertainment news) channels with reference to the choice to cast Jake Gyllenhaal as the “Prince of Persia.” The attention for the film was palpable among Iranian Americans in LA when, in 2009, an event called “Dismantling the Axis of Evil: Reforming Middle Eastern Representations in Hollywood,” co-hosted and sponsored by the Levantine Cultural Center and PAAIA, took place in Downtown LA. Before the controversy came to full public light with the release of the film in August 2010, the debate had already begun to bubble.

In the full auditorium on the evening of the event, Aslan, consultant on the Hollywood blockbuster, shared the stage with Tehranian, author of *Whitewashed* (mentioned above). Aslan is the founder of BoomGen Studios,¹⁵³ an online video channel that targeted youth and second generation Middle Easterners. The event breathed of the disquiet of a community about unjust popular representations, a familiar concern about mainstream media and depictions of Iranian Americans for some of my respondents. This concern was vividly sustained by the video shown to the mostly Iranian American (and Middle Eastern American) audience at the event’s outset: a compilation of clips from Hollywood films over the past 20 years depicting Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims as backward and primitive, dangerous terrorists, wife-beaters, and all-round “bad guys.”¹⁵⁴ The mostly Middle Eastern, mostly middle-aged and young professional audience watched in amazement, and sometimes amusement, at the drastic and skewed portrayals. Despite the grim event title, and the obvious exasperation of some audience members, the tone of the meeting was kept consistently light and entertaining by the MC, comedian, actor, and public figure within the

¹⁵³ BoomGen Studios, is a successful media bureau based in New York City, through which Aslan’s collaboration took place on the *Prince of Persia* project. The bureau is described in an online business profile as: “Continuously collaborating with emerging and established talent, BoomGen Studios functions as an incubator for powerful ideas with mainstream commercial potential – projects that align with the company’s mandate of creating media that effectively furthers the social discourse between the “Western World” and the “Muslim World” while staying committed to mainstream commercial appeal and profitability.”

<http://www.indeed.com/cmp/Boomgen-Studios> (accessed 28/11/14)

¹⁵⁴ The compilation was very similar to the short compilation made based on Sara Sadat-Hosseini’s book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. One of the panellists, Ahmed Ahmed, was Arab American comedian who was also active in challenging stereotypes of violent Arabs in his “axis of evil” international comedy tour which included Maz Jobrani.

Iranian American community, Maz Jobrani, whose own work routinely plays on the labels of “terrorist” and “evil” faced by Middle Eastern Americans.

The girls I sat with in the audience – one, a friend I had arrived with, and two other second generation women, probably in their 20s who we met that night – began chatting around me. They had a burning question. They asked me to put the question to the panel on all our behalves. “Why Jake Gyllenhall?” I asked Reza Aslan. “The girls and I are wondering why you support the casting of this White actor, when John and others tonight have agreed that “Whitewashing” is hurting, not helping, Iranian Americans?” John Tehranian, author of *Whitewashed: America’s invisible Middle Eastern Minority*, sat nodding on the opposite side of the panel.

The young women seemed only semi-satisfied with Aslan’s semi-serious response: first, he offered an ambiguously sardonic mention of the “well-known” axiom that Iranians used to be blue-eyed and light-haired. Then, much more earnestly he proclaimed that, ultimately, the monetary success of the film, with its positive portrayal of a Persian hero, was the best positive publicity that Iranian Americans could hope for, which is also why he thought they and the rest of the audience should support it (financially) by seeing it in the cinema. Speaking more casually to some of us after the event that evening Aslan referred to how “our” older relatives would find legitimacy in a representation of an ancient “Persian” character as appearing white because of a common notion among them of Iranians as Aryan.

Like Pouya on his blog, and Reza Zia-Ebrihimi (the author of the original piece Pouya references, quoted above), a few of my respondents expressed disappointment with regard to Aslan’s stance. They disputed Aslan’s extending scholarly historical credence to what was thought of by several of my respondents (as well as in the excerpt above) as old wives tales. For people like Pouya and others (like Beeta and Pouneh who also referenced the same piece of Facebook and brought up the issue in their own academic and activist activities), this raised concerns about the perpetuation of racist myths. This was especially the case since the self-application of “Aryan” among Iranians is associated with fuelling

anti-Arab sentiment,¹⁵⁵ inter-ethnic prejudices, and superiority complexes around Persian-ness. The contentions in this example set the stage for the divergences among the public representations; ones that are endorsed by some second-generation Iranian Americans and disputed by others.¹⁵⁶

There are similarities here to Franklin's discussion of how everyday internet usage among Pacific Islanders gives space to debates and divides within a single ethnic/racial group. These "online debates," she argues, end up developing post-colonial, subversive subjectivities (Marianne I. Franklin, 2003)¹⁵⁷. She proposes that the everyday self-representations being contested are as much for subjects themselves as for the general public, and that discussions tackling what are usually sensitive issues are part of how subjects make sense of and "define their own identities" in between diaspora life and "back home" (Marianne I. Franklin, 2003). I see a similar dynamic here, with the use of blog posting/linking to articles and Facebook sharing practices used as a channel for extending debate and controversy around claiming race and difference. I continue in the following with the example of Reza Aslan's influential media endeavours, connecting them with the debates I saw within the second generation itself. These divergences compound and cut across differences between generations, although the second generation in particular seems to be bringing these debates to the fore of negotiations of what it means to be Iranian American. As I show in the following, such debates are ongoing within the second generation, and include discussions around class inequity, American cultural citizenship, and political positionings.

¹⁵⁵ See also the discussion of use and reframing Persian histories in Chapter 2 on heritage.

¹⁵⁶ At this junction I heed Maghbouleh's (2012) assertion – drawing on Zia-Ebrahimi (2011) – that it is important to acknowledge that these racial ideologies existed in Iran before Iranian migration waves to the U.S, and that thus racialization of Iranians as non-white began before their arrival in the US, for which she draws on the work of Farnia (2011).

¹⁵⁷ She also says that this is done in ways that are under threat by dominant commercial interests that seek control over internet media.

Whitewashing and US nationhood

In a speech to an audience of approximately 30 students and other Iranian Americans, Zeinab talked about her experience with the FBI. She told the emotional story of the raid on her home, and the subsequent arrest of her father at the cultural center and mosque where her family had been active for many years before her father's imprisonment. Zeinab's father served a total of two and a half years in prison following his sentencing in April 2008 on felony convictions of violation of the US/Iran trade embargo, failing to report income, and omitting information on his naturalization application. He was held since August 2007, pending the trial, and was ultimately released in January 2010 with plans to appeal his conviction in order to clear his name.

Zeinab's description of the event in the room full of students stressed that during the trials and pre-trial hearings, accusations of terrorism and association with terrorist organizations had been made by the prosecution, which she claimed were used to keep her father in prison without bail, even though he was never charged with terrorism. Alongside this, Zeinab said, her father was being held at a Communications Management Unit (CMU) located in Indiana, which is referred to in some news reports as a "terrorism unit" and "secret prison" that holds mostly Arab and Muslim inmates and is designed to limit communications with friends and family through strict restrictions and monitoring on communications through telephone, email, and visits. This meant that Zeinab hardly saw her father during the time he was held.

Some weeks after her speech, in a cafe not far from the university campus, Zeinab told me the gathering had been one of the very few chances she had gotten to tell the story of her family and their treatment by the FBI. Zeinab's personal experience had not only led to a strong fear of FBI surveillance and a sense of anger and betrayal directed at "America," but strikingly it had also led her to feel disenchanted with Iranian Americans around her. She described a realization that Iranian Americans around her had been less supportive than

(non-Iranian) American leftist political/media organizations that had worked with her to circulate her story. Her efforts to bring the case to people's attention had been numerous, and her work in and out of court, sought to draw attention to the racial profiling and mistreatment used by US government agencies in this case. Nevertheless, while reflecting on the worst moments of this period in her life, Zeinab said her experience had somewhat paradoxically made her feel more American.

The more American you are, the more comfortable you feel to criticize America. It is actually very first-generation Iranian to defend America in the way that some around me have by saying it's my father's fault for running a mosque in America, and saying that "this is not an Islamic country." I feel more a part of this society since this happened, and more aware of the politics behind it. I feel more responsibility as an American to contribute to making America a better place. I have only now started to become active and speaking out, so I can't say much about what is a good space for me to express myself, but I appreciate talking to like-minded people, and they are more American... I don't have this with people who have just come from Iran and think that America can do no wrong and that my father shouldn't have made a point of being so active anyway. On the contrary, I believe in the right of all Americans to express themselves, and in the freedom that is necessary for that. I don't see this belief so much in people who have come more recently.

Because of the circumstances Zeinab finds herself in, she feels her sense of American-ness comes with the responsibility to contribute critically to American politics and society, rather than conceal criticism of America in order to mask difference. Zeinab expresses her American-ness through her criticisms, rather than defending the policy decisions and national narratives emanating from the "war on terror." Gradually and somewhat reluctantly, Zeinab takes on the role of a critical American citizen out of the necessity of her situation, putting her graduate engineering degree on hold for a while. In so doing, Zeinab positions herself against both the US "security" policies that so negatively marked her

personal and family life, and the first generation immigrant newcomers from Iran who acquiesce to these policies. . This is a function of her own personal experience with her father's case, but it is just as much because of how she is positioned as an American due to being part of the second generation. In her discussion of postcolonial race and migration, Philomena Essed describes this as a shift that takes place in a late stage of the migration process. "The feeling of 'I am in their country and I'll act like they want me to' gives way to 'what are my rights and what future do I want for my children?'" (Essed, 1997).¹⁵⁸

Zeinab says she is aware of Iranian American organizations like PAAIA and has approached them with her story. However, while PAAIA narrates its own genesis around the need for a collective voice in response to post-9/11 racial profiling, it does not get involved on a case by case basis or in legal matters like this. Her reaching out to the organization had therefore born no fruit, and her impression of PAAIA is characterised by its focus on public affairs, image, and media representations rather than support for those Iranian Americans struggling with the effects of alleged racial profiling. Zeinab expressed severe disappointment in the responses she received from every Iranian American organization she has approached, saying they had all told her that they could not offer support because her (father's) case was "too political."

¹⁵⁸ According to Essed this takes place in the third stage of migration of which she says there are several. The first is characterized by "a rock-solid belief that one will return: the only question is when." This stage is succeeded by a stage in which migrants start to focus more on their improving their position in the new country. And third – the stage referred to above – is characterized by an increased interest to not only participate in the new society but to also take responsibility for it. "This is not only true for the ethnic group they consider themselves part of... but also for society as a whole, and not only for questions of ethnic relations, but also for the environment, disarmament, the neighbourhood, or the position of old people" (Essed, 1997). This has parallels to the activities and ways of thinking demonstrated by several of my respondents. While I do not mean to suggest that this third stage has only started with the second generation, cases like Zeinab's and others' I met suggested to me that second-generation members are most optimally positioned to participate in American society from this vantage point. Essed's stages of migration highlight the shift "from looking back to planning the future." Halleh Ghorashi's (2002) work on first-generation Iranian immigrant women also highlights the significance of this shift in the dealings of migrants – though she sees it as less of a uniformly staged process than a strategy of her migrant women subjects. The focus on the future that involves not only participating in society but contributing to the quality of it – presumably in line with some societal ideals rather than an ethnic minority agenda – seems to be the intent of my most involved respondents. There are as yet very few examples of this in practice as Iranian American representative bodies tend to be dedicated to (the votes/contribution money of) their ethnic constituencies.

So, Zeinab started her own website, calling it “Free Seyed Mousavi” after her father. It gives background information about the case, the family’s arguments and perspectives, court documents, news and media coverage, a petition of support for visitors to sign, and collects donations for bail. It also describes the references to Seyed Mousavi’s association with terrorism that the prosecution repeatedly made, stating:

We were hoping that they [the jury members] wouldn’t be affected by the paranoia that the media has inflicted on Americans with regard to Muslims. All in all, though, we do not blame the jury members for thinking him guilty; the prosecution team did a thorough job in portraying Seyed Mahmood Mousavi as an enemy to the United States and all its citizens.

Zeinab’s endeavour to use internet media in the form of starting a campaign website with official documents and personal details reflects the networks of support she has access to among her contacts and “the community” more generally; and in some respects, the lack thereof. When I spoke with her, her father was still in jail, and she was disappointed that the site was not receiving many visits. She was looking for ways to make it more public and recognized. Although she was disappointed in the website’s lack of impact, many attendees of her father’s mosque showed great support during the case, some reportedly putting their house mortgages up to make the one million dollar bail that was offered at the final bail hearing. All in all, however, Zeinab soon found that technical and design aspects of the site, as well as her disconnection from larger media outlets, meant that her site struggled to attract much of an audience.

Zeinab’s direct experience with the FBI and the US Federal judicial system described here was not shared by many others I spoke with and represented a rather exceptional case. However, stories of those who have had such encounters with the FBI circulate among my respondents, shaping their understandings of the problems effecting Iranian Americans as a group. Zeinab’s experience places her in a particular position with regard to post-9/11 narratives of American nationhood. As her ideas about America changed through this experience, she became more attuned to the American far left’s political and intellectual

tradition of exposing structures of racism in America, including critical discourses with traces of US civil rights era framing of citizenship rights. Her website offers a mediated self-representation that contrasts with the narratives through which the largest and most established Iranian American organizations represent Iranian Americans. In this sense, Zeinab's use of her web page is interesting to understand alongside other, more mainstream ways in which second-generation Iranian Americans are setting up websites to tell their own stories as a racialized minority in the US.

For instance, few second-generation individuals or groups are as influential as Reza Aslan when it comes to representations in mass media productions (as discussed above in the context of his collaboration on the *Prince of Persia* film). Aslan considers his production studio, BoomGen, as a means for changing "this country for the better," by allowing young people to tell their "stories about the Middle East." The following quote was taken from a web video and TEDx talk he gave in 2011.

In order to understand each other we have to rely on our stories. It's story-telling that builds those relationships. It's about the arts, about film, about music, about movies. My company, Boom Gen Studios, helps make films and movies that deal with the stories coming out of the Middle East because we know that it's stories that change people's minds.

Aslan's project to represent Muslim Americans (including those with Iranian American backgrounds) is, at once, a commercial and philanthropic endeavor, and presents itself in the form of the Aslan Media website. This site is dedicated to addressing the exclusion and targeting of Muslim Americans in the US, and together with BoomGen provides various forms of media representation of the Muslim world, the Middle East, and its people through both news/non-fiction genres as well as more entertainment-oriented productions. Aslan's emphasis in the talk referenced above is on the "unity in diversity" of the American nation and the "story" of America as a country of immigrants. His account sustains the narrative of American nationhood as fully and invariably inclusive of minority groups.

Aslan highlights xenophobia against Muslims and not explicitly racial difference. But he uses examples of Jewish and Catholic immigrant minorities as historical milestones that demonstrate the victory of American inclusion of difference into the very fabric of the nation. And although Aslan does not mention this, these were immigrant groups in the US that were also historically racialized as non-white and eventually assimilated into whiteness, and not simply seen as foreigners that came to be accepted as American (Brodkin, 1998; Ignatiev, 1995). One of Aslan's aims in his media work seems to be conveying narratives about Iranian Americans alongside those of other (historically) racialized minority groups and inherent to the narrative of the American nation as united in the persistent and successful diversity of a pluralist multicultural society.

Zeinab and Aslan's projects both take shape within the same context of racialization of Middle Easterners and Muslims in the US, and both position themselves as voices of concern about discrimination, particularly in the context of everyday implications of "the war on terror" on American citizens' lives. Both also rely on the websites they respectively set up to get a message out, each according to their own objectives. The two initiatives come from very different levels of professional, personal, emotional engagement. They also come from different degrees of specificity with regard to the issue of discrimination (i.e. Zeinab's case pertaining to her direct experience only, and Aslan's site presenting both positive and negative stories of many Muslim Americans). Taken together, the instances illustrate how access to and use of web applications alone does not determine how influential these digitally-told stories will be within a broader American media landscape in which messages about Muslim Americans circulate. Their web use as part of their self-representation strategies reflect the variety of content production coming from the second generation, thus conveying the variety of positionings that are hosted side by side. Web usage increases possibilities for alternative self-representation. Yet the access of these representations to audiences depends on the resources they are backed with and how far they match with existing narratives of the nation.

The difference between Zeinab's and Aslan's sites illustrates that web usage involves not only appropriating media production technologies but also other economic and political resources. This connects with the more recent research on the frequently raised problem of the "digital divide," which aims to complicate any straightforward notion of a dichotomy between "haves and have-nots" when it comes to notions of "access" or "inclusion"¹⁵⁹ regarding internet technologies. This work argues instead that hierarchies of usage reflect various kinds of access which are not determined by hardware alone (Selwyn, 2004). The problem of exclusion from media production among minority groups has been extensively documented in media anthropology and cultural studies with a focus on indigenous and post-colonial cases (Ginsberg, 2003; Shohat & Stam, 2003). They show that exclusion from (and access to) media production is neither straightforward nor absolute. Likewise, Zeinab's case illustrates the conjunction of a lack in technical, economic, and political resources.¹⁶⁰

Zeinab's story and the wary reactions to it that she recounts can also be understood in terms of Lentin and Titley's distinction between "good diversity" which requires celebration and cultivation, and "bad diversity" which is diverse matter out of place (2011).¹⁶¹ That is, as certain representations of Iranian American-ness dominate others, find larger audiences, and enjoy wider resonance with existing narratives of American-ness, certain self-representations are relegated to the margins, despite the fact that both reflect usage of public web pages for self-representation. The different technical

¹⁵⁹ Debates around the "digital divide" originally revolved around the disparities between people's access to technologies in more versus less developed countries, featuring problems of racial and economic inequality, but has since come to include discussions of disparities within countries, including developed countries (Selwyn, 2004: 344).

¹⁶⁰ I return to this point in the following part of this section about the privileges of whitewashing.

¹⁶¹ According to their account, the existence and cordoning off of "bad diversity" in practice "is integral to the reworking of the multiculturalist ontology after the failed experiment" (Lentin & Titley, 2011). In other words, the significance of publicly defining what kind of diversity is bad or unacceptable is a consequence of the proposition that the multicultural experiment has failed. This is particularly discussed with relation to the context of the European Union where this failure has been declared in clear terms by heads of state and opinion makers. I see the relevance in the ways people are positioned with relation to the American nation. Good diversity accepts and promotes the narrative of the inclusive multicultural nation and bad diversity is that which highlights a history of exclusion of successive new minorities and continues, in this case, with Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans.

capabilities and design components of both sites reflect the respective resources that went into creating them. In this way, these sites offer paths to self-representation that have as their central aim to inform and correct mainstream understandings of the role of Muslims in American society. But they also represent more and less dominant styles of self-representation, while also representing slightly different positionings with relation to American nationhood.

That is, Aslan's approach seems somewhat more contiguous with the way American narratives of inclusion have been utilized by Iranian Americans more commonly. What I see in the case of the young people I discuss here and elsewhere in this chapter is their positioning with relation to the American nation, which highlights the limits of multicultural inclusion on racial grounds. In this sense, they exercise something more akin to the politics that developed among American Jews (pre-WWII) Brodtkin's account of their oppositional forms of positioning as working class, non-white, and non-mainstream before their rising middle-class status saw them subsumed into American whiteness (Brodtkin, 1998). In the following I move on to discuss further how some of my respondents see Iranian American aspiration's toward middle-class whiteness.

Privileges of whitewashing

Zeinab told me that Negar was one of the few Iranian Americans who she could talk to and who understood and supported her circumstances. When I spoke to Negar,¹⁶² she expressed concern that PAAIA's approach to defining Iranian American difference did not address what she considered one of the most pressing vulnerabilities facing Iranian Americans; namely, the lack of legal advocacy. She wondered why there is no Iranian American equivalent of the organizations that Arab Americans and other "minority groups" have, noting that no advocacy groups exist in the US for Iranian Americans. She explained:

¹⁶² Negar preferred to remain anonymous in the context of this topic, which is why I chose not to include any details about her.

So whereas Latinos and other communities have community-based organizations working with them, we don't have that. We're seeing an emergence of organizations who are interested in doing public interest work on Iranians in the community IAAB, PAAIA, but... their focus is not to help individuals and galvanize community energy. NIPOC either, they don't do advocacy. So let's say I had an immigration problem or the FBI came and visited me. None of these organizations would be [ones] I could go to for support. They're more cultural based organizations. I could go to them and ask them to connect me if they know anybody.

In the United States there's the NAACP. They have a legal defence fund on legal advocacy. There's a Puerto Rican legal defence fund, an Asian American legal defence fund, every community has these kinds of advocacy groups. And in addition to doing individual advocacy, they do actual impact litigation to challenge policy at a political level. These [Iranian American] organizations lobby, they don't file lawsuits. We don't have advocacy groups. NIAC is probably the closest thing we have because it interfaces with the government on a regular basis. They have a policy agenda. But that's it, as far as I know.

The concern Negar expresses here is tied to the troubling consequences she associates with a lack of advocacy funds for those who cannot afford legal defence if racially profiled by government/law enforcement agencies. To Negar, this limits the extent to which people are able to claim and organize around difference in their day to day lives. According to her, not being able to afford legal defence if racially profiled by the FBI may lead people to practice racial covering out of apprehension. Her worry is that "whitewash" will persist regardless of efforts invested in positive publicity campaigns about Iranian Americans by large organizations that focus on "cultural based" agendas and public relations. This is a concern about how socio-economic inequalities and lack of institutionalized support limit people's possibilities to openly present themselves as different.

In line with her point about the lack of legal advocacy provided to Iranian Americans, Negar is also concerned about the way large organizations like PAAIA reproduce stereotypes of

Iranian Americans as uniformly wealthy, highly educated, and a “successful” immigrant group in LA and the US. She is not the only one who expresses this worry. Her concerns raise the contention that the organizations that a new generation is inheriting from the first generation are not equipped to deal with the problem of discrimination and class inequalities because of their focus on “cultural” notions of Iranian-ness. And the newer organizations are as ill-equipped to deal with this issue because of their focus on convincing the public that Iranians are a model “community” and a wealthy immigrant group.

Like Negar, Pouneh is also under the impression that Iranian Americans around her try to emulate higher class positions in order to avoid discrimination. She states, “you’ll be treated differently if you’re whitewashed... Iranians are the most privileged [minorities], depending on how whitewashed they are.” She refers to the persistence of whitewashed Iranian Americans in her environment suggesting that some wilfully feign whiteness as a strategy of being treated with more privilege and acceptance by others. While Negar worries that some continue to whitewash themselves due to lack of economic and institutional support as mentioned by Negar, Pouneh reiterates this concern by recounting how some to practice whitewashing in order to gain/maintain a socially privileged status compared to other minority groups. Whitewashing, according to these two accounts, can be both a consequence of some Iranian Americans’ lower socio-economic status, and a factor contributing to some Iranian American’s maintenance of higher socio-economic status. In both cases, the role of performances of class and socio-economic status are connected with emulating whiteness and covering racial difference. And both these young women consider practices of whitewashing problematic and unconstructive in bringing to light the problems of racism that Iranian Americans face, which is why they work to highlight the problems of racism. They do this not by representing themselves as exceptional migrants, but by supporting inclusion of Iranian Americans from all socioeconomic backgrounds in collective representations.

This rejection of Iranian Americans as exceptional migrants also appears in the creative stylings of public personas by some of my respondents. It also usually is targeted against a dominant image Iranian Americans in LA being associated with wealth (and thus a “model minority” group). Azad’s story is a good example of this. Azad, a young man in his early 20s, is an aspiring rap musician. He has relied heavily on social networking sites to gain attention as an artist in order to pursue a career as an artist. The following is a statement that alludes to his engagement with Iranian American-ness and his affinity with hip hop music and the positionings of other racialized immigrant groups in his environment from an early age.

Yes I grew up here [in Santa Monica], but the question is how did we live here? My father is legally blind, so we lived off government money and the friends I have are Mexican and Black. Right? [looking towards his African American friend who was sitting next to him]. My growing up experience was really a melting pot... I didn’t really have a lot of contact with the Iranian community because I didn’t feel similar to them economically. One time I went to a party with my girlfriend. She lived near Sabone/Sunset and had invited me to a house party in Beverly Hills. There were expensive cars lined up in the street in front as I arrived. I felt really out of place. That’s something about this generation... Hip hop was an interest of mine for some time. I started out with spoken word poetry and it became rap.

I see the passion for hip hop by Azad as giving a voice to the experience of racialized and class-based difference through a particular, widely -recognizable and popular cultural style. That this genre of self-expression fits with the experiences of second generation Iranian American youth may have to do with the fact that the African American experience of “race” in the US as both imposed categorization and self-identification has been important not only in its own terms, but from the late 1960s on as a template for identity claims of all sorts, including those based on gender and sexual orientation as well as based on “ethnicity” and “race”(Brubaker & Coopers, 2000).

The rise in popularity of hip hop in LA (and the particular subgenre of “gangsta rap” a strain of hip hop with strong roots in Los Angeles), came with the deindustrialization process that took place in LA during the 1960s and 1970s and the rise in crime rates as a result of the dilapidation of the Watts neighbourhood in South Central LA (Kelley, 1996). This fuelled an increasingly militarized response on the part of the LAPD in the 1980s, which in turn led to gangsta rap being primarily directed against police violence, domination, and discrimination, as argued by Robin Kelley (1996).¹⁶³ The development of hip hop music in LA has a particular trajectory that is shaped by the history of the city’s own development. The remarkable popularity of hip hop and its gaining prominence in mainstream American pop culture in the US since its beginnings signals what Cornell West calls the “African Americanization of American culture”(1999).

It is argued that an emulation of class downward mobility by some represents the inversion of the rags to riches story of African American rap music (Hess, 2005). However, rather than reverse the rags to riches narrative per se, the second generation seem to use it as a vehicle for criticism of a perceived lack of inclusion of Iranian Americans (themselves or others) who do not fit into the established and relatively positive stereotypes of Iranian Americans. This seems to be especially relevant when young people cannot relate to Iranian American-ness as entailing a life of privilege. The racial politics of difference expressed in this style are particularly attractive because of the “oppositional culture” (Schneider & Crul, 2014; Thomson & Crul, 2007) attached to them as has been argued in other research on the second generation, and an element embraced by some of my respondents. They are positioned through certain styles, in this case subcultural musical styles through which self-representation takes shape.

While adopting this expressly non-white positioning, though, it is interesting to note the similarities between what some of my respondents are doing and Traber’s discussion of

¹⁶³ With the rise in popularity of this musical genre, white rappers have taken the stage since the 80s and through the 90s into the present (Hess, 2005). Kelley also notes a rise in popularity of gangsta rap among white suburban consumers in the post-LA rebellion political climate.

how American middle class (heterosexual male) whiteness has been rejected through various forms of “resistant self-fashioning” in the US (e.g. punk) (2007: 2). Traber’s investigation of American culture from a literary perspective argues that self-marginalization through association with non-whiteness is taken up as a demonstration of agency and a drive to break with the mainstream. However, a conventional logic of liberal individualism tends to be embraced when people position themselves in oppositional ways, and according to Traber, this proves them once again complicit with the power formation and values of the mainstream. That is, oppositional stylings adopt individualized self-expression, and thus the challenge to liberal logic of individual consumption is channelled towards resistant styles rather than a resistance of this mainstream logic. The similarities to my respondents’ forms of self-fashioning become even more evident in my later discussion of the use of hip hop music in this chapter. Here I have tried to show the racial ambivalence that characterizes my respondents’ self-representations. They are an overwhelmingly middle-class, educated minority who can therefore sometimes “pass” for white, some of whom reject whiteness and its embedding in American nationhood. They do so by drawing upon their experiences of racial discrimination. But they equally position themselves against a dominant mode of being Iranian American-ness that they see as highlighting a model minority status.

Framing discrimination

There are divergences within the second generation in LA as to how to forge new narratives and public representations for Iranian Americans at a time when difference is being made explicit. There are contentions around how to claim difference in a changing atmosphere in which Iranian Americans are seen as *de facto* Muslims and racialized as such. My respondents criticize other Iranian Americans’ practices of emulating whiteness. However, they also draw attention to the sustained appeal of whitewashing for some, especially in the face of discrimination and/or marginalization.

According to them, whiteness can be emulated through shows of wealth; by clinging to Aryan-ness; by collectively presenting Iranian Americans as exceptional migrants; by not openly presenting oneself as Muslim. Their concern is that such practices of “racial covering” – to use the term Tehranian and some others I spoke to deploy – obscure a reality about being Iranian American. Namely, that Iranian-ness has always entailed being non-white. They implicitly acknowledge that the official social categories in the US context are seen as having changed over time, and that the experience of migration to the US in the first place has helped define the boundaries of white-ness and non-whiteness. Yet, the collective racial non-whiteness of Iranian Americans (whether covered or revealed) is also talked about as something that simply is, and has always remained the same. Performances of whiteness are seen as having mitigating influences on how Iranians are seen racially, but the basic racial difference is claimed to be self-evidently and consistently present in bodies. These people are therefore positioned closer to American racial/ethnic minorities than the white majority.

Kazinitz et al. have reviewed the sociological research on the effects for second-generation immigrants of being positioned close to American minorities. He sketches a paradox in which, on the one hand, contemporary second-generation immigrants keep strong ethnic networks that the first generation have maintained and thus increase their upward mobility while not “assimilating” into existing racialized minority groups with longer histories of discrimination and lower socio-economic status. On the other hand, the second generation may adopt an “oppositional” or “reactive ethnicity” that brings them closer to these existing racial minorities, which is thought to make them “sceptical of the possibility of upward mobility and particularly about the value of education” and ostensibly leading to downward mobility (see Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, & Waters, 2006: 8). They also argue that racial similarities between the children of new migrants and long-standing racialized groups increase the second generation’s propensity to socio-economic downward mobility in his discussion of the intersection between race, class, and second-generation ethnic identity (Kasinitz et al., 2006).

The adoption of certain subcultural styles connects my respondents to parts of other racialized minorities in the US like African Americans, and I discuss the ways the Iranian American second generation becomes part of a pan-Middle Easterners racial/ethnic identity¹⁶⁴ in the following section. Yet the threat of downward mobility appears less relevant here. Rather, cross-ethnic connections they draw are a source of agency for young people to form preferred representations of themselves, using common experiences of exclusion. Being a racialized minority in the US allows my respondents certain possibilities for positioning themselves as American citizens, as migrants, and ‘others’ in the midst of the American nation; a nation with its own specific history with racializing minorities that my respondents mobilize. Yet as members of this second generation begin to publicly claim difference in terms of race and racial discrimination, they also experience the limits to these discourses of inclusion. As I pointed out, these include limitations such as “good” versus “bad” exhibits of diversity, and they also mean the necessary adherence to racial categorizations in general.¹⁶⁵ Additionally, I suggested that by adopting oppositional styles of racial positioning, their practices feed back into the mainstream logic of liberal individualism. This makes oppositional strategies commonplace through popular styles while reinforcing existing power structures. My respondents’ modes of self-styling reflect youth pop cultural elements particularly suited to the second generation, helping them to further broader anti-racist positionings. In the following section I elaborate more on what the possibilities that web usages offer for these self-stylings.

Regarding the role of web usage, it is evident that to a certain extent their availability is able to “enhance the capacity to harness otherness,” as has been argued of the role of internet in migrants’ identity practices (Nedelcu, 2012: 1339). Yet, there seem to be various shades of claiming otherness. Certain ways of using websites I discussed have been used to demonstrate how the line between commercially vested (and increasingly mainstream)

¹⁶⁴ This is very similar to Kasintiz’s account of the emergence of the identity of “Asian American” and “Latino” in the American context among the second generation of a variety of different immigrant groups with different experiences of migration (Kasinitz, 2004).

¹⁶⁵ Though I discuss cases of those who move to challenge such categories as well in the following section

media representations and the use of web applications as an oppositional form is blurred. Websites afford both the promotion of large, professional public relations-oriented projects and organizations with large audiences alongside under-resourced and far less influential private initiatives to get one's "story out." As some Iranian Americans slowly rise to positions in prominent media production circuits, new inclusions and exclusions are created when it comes to whose stories are told and who/what represents Iranian Americans. These inclusions and exclusions appear to be reflected in modes of web usage as well. In the following section, I go further into the stylized elements of various media self-representations by my respondents, with particular attention for the clear rise in significance of the category of "Middle Eastern American" and the implications of its use.

Being Middle Eastern in America

Global subcultures

In the aftermath of 9/11, a program of special registration was set up. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr (2009) document the measures and their results in the following way in their study, mentioning the particular effects as they were felt immediately after the attacks:

Men older than 16 who were citizens of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria allegedly terrorist-training countries who had entered the U.S. before September 10, 2002 and planned to remain at least until December 16, 2002 were required to register with the INS before December 16, 2002. On December 16, 2002, other countries were added to the list. Failure to report to the INS was cause for deportation. Ironically, many people who obeyed the order were deported anyway. Special registration increased the workload of an already strained INS staff. The men, who complied with the orders, complained of harsh treatment by INS staff, long waits

without access to food or water. More seriously, the lives of many families were disrupted as husbands were detained and deported, leaving wives and children without any means of support and no opportunity to rejoin the men unless they return to his country of origin. Over 80,000 men had registered by early May 2003.

Special registration resulted in the arrest of several hundred Iranians in Los Angeles who were deemed in violation of their visas. This order created unprecedented demonstrations and protests from the Iranian American population in Los Angeles, the largest such concentration in the U.S. Having designated the Islamic Republic of Iran part of the “Axis of Evil,” individuals bearing Iranian passports were denied visa issuance and subjected to Special Registration even though Iranians had nothing to do with 9/11. In November 2003, almost coinciding with the first anniversary of Special Registration, the government reversed its decision of requesting men from a number of Arab and/or Muslim countries to repeat this procedure annually. During its implementation, this initiative was not effective in apprehending any terrorists.

In LA, the phenomenon of special registration was repeatedly invoked as part of post-9/11 profiling of Iranian Americans and Middle Easterners in the US. It was framed as problematic by its critics because of the baseless official association of Iranians with the perpetration of the attacks on the WTC and Pentagon, and also because of the undermining of the rights of the US residents criminalized because of this measure.¹⁶⁶ Among other things, the policy showed how racialized discrimination takes shape in gendered ways as it implies a particular threat posed by Middle Eastern men. I found it striking that my respondents were involved in multiple forms of positioning themselves against this kind of discrimination via discursive practices of forming connections with other Middle Eastern Americans, which I describe in the following.

¹⁶⁶ For more work on the impacts of Congressional Bills, INS practices, and law enforcement policies after 9/11 on Middle Eastern men in the US see review by Cainkar, (2004)

Hip hop artist, Omar Offendum is known for his politically “conscious” lyrics that draw attention to his ‘bi-cultural’ background as a Syrian American, while scholar, Moustafa Bayoumi, asks the question *How Does it Feel to be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*, as the title of his 2008 book, which features the very same question posed by W.E.B Du Bois in an evocative piece on being black in America first published in 1897 (Du Bois, 2007). These two young men, respectively, performed and spoke at the 2011 Camp Ayadeh (Camp Future), the social and pedagogical environment of IAAB’s summer camp for leadership. The Americans of Arab background that were invited to Ayandeh position themselves, use their work to take a stance against anti-Muslim and anti-Arab discrimination through their work. The organization’s aim of “alliance-building” includes alliances between Iranian American and Arab American youth, specifically through inviting prominent Arab American artists and scholars to the popular summer youth camp they organized called Camp Ayandeh and reflects the commonality between ways of experiencing racial difference between these two groups of Middle Eastern American youth. And it is notable that young men are the ones who dominate this musical genre, which gives them a vehicle to speak to being seen as “a problem”.

This is evident in another example on Justin’s blog, in a short video trailer that includes Yassin Alsalman. He is a young, male, second generation Iraqi Canadian rapper, speaking about how the hip hop music genre plays a positive role in the lives of people like himself. He is featured speaking in a high quality video about his book, *Diatribes of a Dying Tribe*. Alsalman goes by the artist name, Narcycist, and makes the following statement in the video.

It’s an example of how hip hop has been used to create an identity or help create a space for people who feel underrepresented or misrepresented. Arabs, in this case.¹⁶⁷

The above video is posted on Justin’s blog, Mashouf TV, which has the by-line, “The online adventures of director Justin Mashouf”. On Justin’s blog, the book is described as being

¹⁶⁷ Mashouf TV, “Diatribes of a Dying Tribe,” <http://mashouf.tv/?p=6> (accessed 1/12/14)

“about the jumbled reality of North American life. The destructive components of juxtaposing cultures, the birth of immigrant internationality and the resilient art that comes out of struggle and oppression.” As a hip hop dancer, Justin is connected with a network of North American Muslims of Middle Eastern descent that is based around hip hop. Far from being limited hip hop networks, discursive connections between young Iranian Americans and other Middle Eastern Americans are given shape by the second generation in other art forms with their public platforms for speaking to current societal conditions. Second-generation Iranian American author, Porochista Khakpour, writes in an opinion piece for the New York Times about the emergence of a “pan-Middle Eastern identity,” one that arose specifically in the wake of 9/11 when all Middle Easterners were “clumped together” according to Khakpour.¹⁶⁸

The “racialization of religion” in the US (Joshi, 2006) suggests that phenotypical features that have come to be associated with a racial group come to take on religious connections. In this case, boundaries between the categories of Muslim and Middle Eastern Americans¹⁶⁹ seem to blur as racialization processes merge groups. In this process, the category of Middle Eastern American gains currency as a way for young Iranian Americans to see themselves under these circumstances, and offers a basis for putting these new boundaries into practice on their own behalves. As Andrew Shryock argues,

the fact that many Arab Americans now believe anti-terrorism policies have constituted them as a “distinct racial group” says a great deal about the trauma of 9/11, the experience of marginalization and stigma, and how these are reshaping identity politics among Arabs and Muslims in the United States (cited in Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009: 99)

The same applies to some of my respondents as well. Justin connects with other Middle Eastern American and Muslim American individuals of second generation migrational

¹⁶⁸ The piece also appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* and the *New Yorker*

¹⁶⁹ This raises interesting questions about how (second generation) Jewish and Christian Middle Eastern Americans experience the developments described here.

backgrounds, and embracing the hip hop genre is an interesting vehicle for making these connections. He blogs about experiences with border-crossing impediments as well as feature them in his film, an experience that was referred to by other Iranian Americans and also featured as the main theme in a music video by the Narcycist for his song, P.H.A.T.W.A.¹⁷⁰ Justin and the Narcycist also identify in their work and their public personas as Muslim. Aside from the narratives of border hindrances, some of the second generation express concern about the misconceptions and aggression they sometimes feel from other Iranian Americans due to being Muslim.

My respondents expressed being in a particular position because of their Iranian-ness and Muslim-ness, a position that is caught between strong negative associations with the Islamic Republic on the part of the older generation who have had direct traumatic experiences with the revolution, and the Islamophobia and prejudices they encounter in contemporary America. While talking about the gap between those who have come recently from Iran and those who have been incorporated into the US for much longer, Zeinab pointed out the implications for Iranian Americans' "ways of being Muslim."

I think [newcomers from Iran] think Iranians have to either be Muslim or not be Muslim. They don't link up with the strength of others like Arabs and Pakistanis and Afghans who have been more comfortable with being Muslim. I wish there could be more relaxed ways of being Muslim that shouldn't get so much criticism from both sides [both other Iranian Americans and Americans].

The alliances built among the second generation along lines of being Muslim or Middle Eastern in America serve as a buffer against the hostility that sometimes comes with openly identifying as Muslims among Iranian Americans in LA. The Iranian diaspora in LA has been commonly defined as a largely secular immigrant group in terms of public practice and their self-distinctions from the Islamic Republic. In one instance, Saman, the

¹⁷⁰ The pronunciation of the title as Fatwa (decree issued by a Sunni or Shia Islamic religious leader) and the use of the spelling of the slang word Phat (cool) is a play on words at the junction of language commonly used in hip hop music and language commonly associated in the West with radical Islam.

second generation son of the owner of well-established Mosque and cultural center in LA, IMAN, stated that Muslim Iranian Americans he knew felt more like a minority religious group than the majority they were in numbers. He acknowledges it was sometimes difficult to be Muslim within a diaspora that has fled the grave mistreatments they experienced in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Islam and being Muslim is uniformly left out of self-representations of Iranian Americans in large public organizations. In this sense, the (internet mediated) self-representations of people like Justin not only position him against border controls, but also against specific associations that *other* Iranian Americans in his environment use to connect his Muslim identity with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This mobilization of hip hop styles is a way to give shape to being Muslim, Middle Eastern, Iranian, and American for young men like Justin. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, hip hop is also used to refer to cross-connections with other immigrant or ethnic/racial minority groups such as African Americans through narratives of class mobility. Not only hip hop but youth subcultural, musical styles more generally have a history of being embedded in the developments that shaped the city of LA. The punk music scene of LA's 80s and 90s, like its original London-based movement, adopted a class politics out of distaste for symptoms of white privilege, mostly by white youth. It was a politicized movement that subverted American norms of social inclusion by rejecting upward mobility, the pursuit of middle class lifestyles, and ascription to the American dream (Traber, 2007). The links between youth subcultures and social change have been discussed as the deployment of subcultural capital (see Hall & Jefferson, 2006). In this case, both hip hop and punk movements of LA were a response to the deindustrialization of the city in the later part of the 20th century, the dilapidation of the inner city, and the parallel burgeoning of suburban lifestyles.

As part of their deployment of these youth subcultural styles, my respondents make use of YouTube to post and share music videos, write blogs, and make links to others who do the same. The possibilities of writing, video production, and become integrated into practices of web usage. They mobilize subcultural capital through practices of self-representation by

highlighting how their lives are marked by being seen as different and using this to position themselves. Their web usage reflects the social aspects of creating links with others involved in such cultural production and consumption. They not only utilize subcultural forms that have a widespread appeal among youth, and within LA as an important centre for hip hop's development, but these same subcultural forms are a response to the sphere of global discourses of "the war on terror" and international relations between the US and Iran. In the process, these self-representations shape adherences between Iranian Americans and other Middle Eastern Americans around their shared experiences of racialization within, and with relation to, the US. Here I have shown how "new spheres of co-operation," work between second-generation Iranians and other racialized groups – to use the terminology of Kasinitz et al. discussing the racialized second generation in the US.

[Assimilation] implies the reshuffling of boundaries and the making of connections across boundaries in new and complex ways. If at times this leads to conflict, it also creates new spheres of co-operation (Kasinitz et al., 2006: 9).

In this way we can understand the connections and cooperation young Iranian Americans seek out with other racialized groups as being part of their incorporation into American-ness. In the following I continue to discuss the overlap of gender and racialization from the perspective of some members of the second generation women I spoke with.

Not passive victims: broader claims to color

There's quite a different perception of Middle Eastern women as victims, as the oppressed, which I think most Middle Eastern women can't stand. Although, especially in the world of publishing, it's interesting how much this image has been perpetuated. And how much money has even come out of that image.

Porochista Khakpour speaks here in a video interview posted on the website, *Big Think*, a site that aggregates blogs, videos and articles featuring the ideas of a variety of contemporary thinkers, professionals, authors, and “experts” in a multimedia digital format. In the video interview she explains how she has noticed that much contemporary writing focusing on the Middle East places women central. Her own novel, *Sons and other Flammable Objects*, deals specifically with the worlds of Middle Eastern men, exploring the relationships of its male protagonists.

When was the last time you saw a book by an Iranian author that *did not* feature on its cover a Persian carpet, pomegranates, faux Middle Eastern arabesque fonts, or a woman in some sort of headscarf? Big publishing and mainstream media in the U.S. seemed just as eager as the Islamic Republic to cast highly photogenic women in veils-and-lashings tearjerkers; they relegated their writers, particularly women, to victim ingénues. Yes, these are true stories, but only one type of story, which is particularly frustrating when so many others remain untold.

Porochista’s sentiment about the level and type of attention that Middle Eastern – and, among them, Iranian American women - have garnered in recent years is more widespread. Coming up against the idea of Middle Eastern women as oppressed victims is not limited to publishing, as Amitis’ experience as an artist reflects. Amitis recounted a first-hand experience of a potential (male) buyer who she found expecting to see a similar self-victimization in her own pieces.

He wanted my work to go in a certain direction. And it was this direction I’m seeing a lot of the women artists in New York go in: ‘I’m a woman artist, I’m so oppressed, and won’t you save me.’ And it wasn’t going in that direction. And I’m starting to see that again. And I’m a little perturbed by it because I thought we were passed that. If anything, the artists I’ve met here on the West Coast are the ones trying to kick that notion out of the way. There’s been a real active engagement of kicking that notion out of the way. So I’m a little disturbed by that.

Amitis repeatedly mentions a tendency among audiences as well as a tendency among female artists themselves to portray women in Iran as victims of their own male-dominated society. As Amitis described it, this was a particular phenomenon of the diaspora and not the Iran-based artists she had contact and collaboration with. She saw this as being encouraged by the audiences in the US, whether intentionally or not. She spoke earnestly about the problems this image of Iranian women raised for her.

This is a strategy of war. That's one thing that's very important to recognize... that this is something people do during a time of war. It's always to pit the men against the women. To displace that connection that people have with one another. But also to fetishize the women of the region. The combination of, 'they're really ugly, they're really stupid'; to 'they're really beautiful, exotic, they need to be saved'.

These two women and many other Iranian women authors and artists are engaged in representing themselves as Middle Eastern women through their work or in their comments on their work and that of other women, and the artistic industries in which they work. Second-generation young women, professionally and politically, are in a position to tell their own stories and tell them publicly in ways that are relevant to progressive American audience. This is what the work of certain second generation women authors and artists shows. And their position is one that shows a clear awareness of a trend in representing Middle Eastern and Iranian women. Amitis emphasized this image of "the Iranian woman" as oppressed and Other, standing in contrast to the role of American society as emancipated and a source of liberation. As Moallem argues about the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, "Islamic fundamentalism has become a generic signifier used constantly to single out the Muslim other, in its irrational, morally inferior, and barbaric masculinity, and its passive, victimized, and submissive femininity (Moallem, 2005: 8).¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ I also observed a strong reaction by some of my respondents to the tendency of Western news press to represent narratives about Iranian women in Iran as revolving around their sexuality, sexual emancipation, extreme sexual acts and hypersexualized social scenes, especially in the country's urban centers. This was a reaction that I noted more recently and while it seem to hang together with the argument I make here, it was a more circumstantial observation.

This dually gendered representation of the Muslim other is challenged here by women, just as it discussed it being challenged by men above in this section.

Amitis critically mentioned the acclaim such orientalisng representations of Iranian women receive among American audiences. This includes when the representations are created by Iranian women artists. At the same time, this image of Iranian women as victimized somewhat paradoxically thrusts forward the careers of the women who produce these images of their lives being marked by Islam, their male-dominated “culture,” and their own subjugation. Focusing on weblogs by Iranian women, Shakhsari argues that in a time of war, (Farsi) language skills become particularly marketable and profitable, as do certain narratives of the Iranian diaspora; hence the rise in these narratives:

In the market for information and expertise, some diasporic Iranians become entrepreneurs who participate in the production and marketing of a particular form of knowledge about Iran (Shakhsari, 2011: np).

Based on her ethnographic work among bloggers in Toronto, Canada, Shakhsari argues that the dominant representations of “Weblogestan” are gendered by the discourse of the “war on terror.” Her research shows how women bloggers negotiate their subject positions through blogs while also being subject to these dominant representations that limit the shapes that their agency takes, making them complicit with those “hegemonic nationalist and neoliberal discourses” (2011). Not unlike Amitis’ account, Porochista speaks about how this complicity of women artists reveals itself in art created by Iranian diaspora women as well. At the annual IAAB diaspora conference in November of 2012, the young novelist and essayist shone a spotlight on the commercialization of literary art, referring to the roles of publishers and agents whose market-oriented demands tend to interfere with women writers’ voices. It is in this context that she raises complaints about her novel being repeatedly called a memoir in coverage; about being told by a New York Times editor that her voice was her “brand” and that all her writing must be filtered through it; about reading memoirs by successful Iranian diaspora women writers that she could not relate to. She

describes such successful works as together forming their own “brand-hood” that established itself in the early 2000s. These, according to her, had:

A familiarity that did not come out of my own personal experience but, like fairy tales, out of insta-classic storylines, canned themes, stock characters and cardboard settings that I had already - without even having finished [reading] any [of these memoirs]- seen before.

In this talk, Poroquista describes her work, in contrast to these successful memoirs, as offering “a shade of difference that seemed particularly necessary in the last decade” when the professional creative work of Iranian American women became subject to certain expectations regarding the representation of Iranian Americans. She attributed the success she herself has enjoyed to her (incidental) insistence on having listened to what she calls her own “authentic” voice, rather than the direction of editors and publishers. Women like Poroquista and Amitis are acutely aware of the ways their own self-representations are shaped by such dynamics (or, rather, resist precisely such shaping).

Ghorashi’s discussion of Muslim women in the Netherlands is analytically illuminating here, as it highlights a stark distinction emerging between notions of the “unemancipated other” as opposed to the “emancipated self,” a distinction she argues is inherent to the recent and drastic increase in the visibility of Muslim women in the West (Ghorashi, 2010: 94).¹⁷² The complex experience and positioning of young women I spoke with suggests

¹⁷² Along similar lines, in earlier work on Iranian refugee women in the Netherlands, Ghorashi writes: “Dominant images of femininity in Dutch society shape the perception of migrant women as ‘the victimized other’. According to these images, Dutch women are modern and emancipated, while Iranian women—as women from the Middle East—are seen as oppressed and traditional. Such stereotypical perceptions not only disregard that in every society some women are ‘modern’ or ‘progressive’ while others are ‘traditional’ and ‘conservative’, but also ignores the struggle of these Iranian women activists against traditional ideas in Iran. In this way, these women face a new burden they did not expect, namely the dominant stereotypes of Middle Eastern women, in which they are seen as dependent and passive victims (van Baalen 1997; Lutz and Moors 1989; Spijkerboer 1994). This construction of an ‘imagined other’ can be seen as part of a process of othering of the Orient, which Edward Said (1978) named ‘Orientalism’ (see also Jansen 1996; Lutz 1991; Spijkerboer 1999)” (H. Ghorashi, 2005)

their awareness of and critical engagement with these images of Iranian American women as racialized and gendered in this particular context of being between visibility and invisibility. Through the media they are versed and trained in producing, their stories come out. This is not always, primarily internet-based. It includes novels, performance art, interviews, opinion pieces, essays and more. Here I have shown how some of my respondents articulate strong positions against gendered and racialized representations from within their own professional circuits and towards broader audiences. As the young men I described earlier taking on global sub cultural forms as part of oppositional expressions, these women take up critical intellectual positions that expose the racial and gendered character of dominant representations of Iranian women. In the following, I move on to a more elaborate discussion of how their responses in the form of web-based self-representations take shape as some exercise a politics of claiming the label of “women of color.”

Claiming and rejecting racialization

Amitis created a fantasy alter-ego for herself that features repeatedly in her work; a woman named “Sandy Sand Ninja Najib,” inspired by wrestling super hero characters and the eroticization of “ethnic” women, the Sand Ninja is embodied by Amitis dressing up in revealing clothing or in a state of partial undress, with a darkly drawn set of connecting eyebrows, heavy lipstick, and gold jewelry. Amitis has also set up a profile for this ironically fashioned and flamboyant persona, on which some of her Facebook friends comment and post photographs and links to articles, addressing her as “Amitis” but expressing their adoration for “the Sand Ninja.” This is part of how Sand Ninja’s profile describes her:

Exile, her family debt, as well as financial and language constraints keep her isolated from her homeland, people and culture. She constructs an identity made up of her own melancholic recollections of her people as well as a pan-“middle eastern” look created by Western projections and stereotypes.

The humorous, tongue-in-cheek, and provocative depiction on the profile page provides a creative space for deconstructing the dominant images and narratives around racialized women's bodies. Interestingly, it also plays on the notion that exile can create a caricature version of a "culture" of the "homeland," which in this case lends itself to self-exoticization. Amitis documents her use of the Sand Ninja's persona in various locations in LA as part of her artwork, and then posts them on the Facebook page she has constructed. Amitis' self-representation finds its way to internet media indirectly, through the Sand Ninja and through her prior familiarity with Facebook. This goes for others as well, and demonstrates the strength of convergence that internet media have been associated with. This tendency towards subsuming other media forms (such as photography, print editing, and film) into its digitally networked applications, means that internet media enter into the practices of producers like Amitis without them necessarily making a conscious choice to use internet in their work, but because of the ubiquity of a media forum like Facebook to represent a "profile" of a particular person/persona.

The use of a caricature like Amitis' "Sandy" represents the open subversion of certain images of Iranian American women. It is critique against being labelled and limited by extensive attention for certain existing narratives. The aversion to being categorized by others is further evident in the example of Porochista's guest editorship for Guernica web magazine in 2011.¹⁷³ It is where she wrote the following as part of the introduction of the special edition she put together about the category "Iranian American," which included the work of a host of varied Iranian American authors.

[C]ategorization and its many cons had haunted me since I came to this country as a wee preschooler. With looks described as exotic at best and a hyperethnic multisyllabic name regarded as unattempts at worst, I was coronated an ambassador of my particular brand of other just by virtue of being someone else's

¹⁷³ Khakpour, Porochista "The Others," http://www.guernicamag.com/features/khakpour_11_1_11/ [accessed 28/11/14]

first. When I was four, I decided to be a writer *precisely because* the realm of the imagination freed me from confinement regarding how and to whom I was born.

This is part of what I see as a second generation-led effort to create representations based around multifacetedness of Iranian American-ness. Porochista's efforts to subvert categorization echoes the moves made by more of my respondents towards challenging the typical public appetite for certain representations of Iranian Americans and Middle Eastern women by diversifying stories coming from among Iranian diaspora. This explicit objective of diversifying representations rather than claiming any single, alternative representation is equally a claim to difference on one's own terms by women who have the feeling that they are increasingly visible on others' terms.

Another project highlighting the multiplicity among Iranian Americans and resisting easy categorizations is *Document: second generation Iranian Americans in Los Angeles*. It was a unique initiative and an explicit endeavour to represent Iranian American-ness in an innovative way. *Document* was a photography exhibit displaying portraits of second generation Iranian Americans by second generation Iranian Americans. Amy, the curator of the exhibit, described this project for the public in the following way on the UCLA Fowler gallery's website:

In cultivating this collaborative project, I wanted to examine documentation as a representational process by offering four Iranian-American photographers' perspectives on who we are, stressing the importance of including multiple voices in documenting our own Los Angeles communities.

The virtual gallery was originally planned to accompany the show, but this web presence clearly held secondary status within the project to the physical exhibition. This and other initiatives to represent Iranian Americans through art reflect a desire for a diversity of voices as a response to (gendered, racial, and other) stereotypes of Iranian Americans. Gaining collective visibility has meant being placed in a position to develop self-representations that ponder the boundaries of Iranian American-ness, not for the first time,

but in newly public ways, attuned to audiences that are not limited to Iranian Americans themselves, and through editorship and curatorships that demand authority and expertise in particular areas of media production. *Document* is an example of a production that acknowledges racialized stereotypes but goes beyond claiming racial categories in its self-representation of the second generation. It demonstrates that not all challenges to the racialization of Middle Easterners coming from my respondents are, themselves, explicit mobilizations of self-categorizations as non-white but are attempts at humanization and diversification of images of Iranians (including Muslims, half-white Americans, men, women, and children).

Rather than being relegated to the margins of a diasporic identity by their subversion, they engage in projects of self-description so through their professional positions as producers of representations through various media forms. They exhibit potentials to lead the trajectory of Iranian American-ness at this juncture, doing so in a way that is not entirely encompassed by the in-between, ambivalent position that work on the second generation has tended to emphasize (see King & Christou, 2008). As Durham argues, attention is necessary for the potential that young immigrants show for reading media texts oppositionally, or against the grain of what is intended (Durham, 2004). This appears relevant in this case in as far as media representations are engaged with critically by members of the second generation to position themselves. The projects by young, second-generation women I have mentioned reflect different ways of representing Iranian American-ness against the grain of racialization. These instances show less ambivalence than a desire to either directly or indirectly take on and change dominant racialized and gendered representations.

I see the (gendered) racialization of Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans as the salient context within which my respondents use the creative work of musical, literary, and other artistic and cultural production to put forth their own self-representations of Iranian-ness. It is striking that on the one hand, this includes modes of self-representation that mobilize the category of non-whiteness as a racial category used to subvert processes of social

exclusion. On the other hand, there are evidently also self-representations that go beyond claiming non-whiteness. These challenge the boundaries that define Iranian American-ness by reflecting on them. The tension that is placed central in such projects as *Document*, therefore, is one that sustains the significance of identifying explicitly as “Iranian American” while also questioning what that entails given the diversity of meanings the label is assigned and ways Iranian-ness is practiced among the second generation in LA.

As mentioned, web applications feature in these practices of representing Iranian Americans. Web applications incorporate a variety of existing media forms through these practices, including performing arts, literature and books, photography exhibits. Most often web applications serve as a vehicle for mediating already existing work and events in ways that present themselves as logical to the producers, and their kinds of media usage primarily reflects their professional skills, backgrounds, and resources. But these applications also have particular statuses and purposes. In Amitis’ Sand Ninja performance, Facebook becomes part of the public performance by spreading the audiences to this social media platform. While in the case of *Document*, the exhibit is more of a stand-alone event with the web exhibit’s absence apparently not detracting much from the project. The interest in using web applications extends from the production of artistic works of self-description. In Amitis’ case, her web usage affords thinking about her art and her audiences in new ways. Just a few years before the Sand Ninja’s appearance on Facebook, Amitis had told me about this performance piece, but had not yet begun using Facebook as part of performing Sandy. At the time, she doubted the usefulness of web applications for her work, mentioning that she worked with underprivileged minority students of art who did not all have access to internet. Since then, the preponderance of Facebook’s modes of self-representation and self-fashioning (i.e. with photos, profile descriptions of oneself) helped to create the performance of Sandy as a character via a new platform.

Gendered Middle Easterners

A racialized category of “Middle Eastern” comes to hold increasing credence for my respondents. Some use this as an ethnic category that helps them participate in what are styled as global youth subcultures, participating in what Eva Lam’s research among youth and digital media calls “global digital spaces” (Lam, 2006). I suggest that global nature of the “war on terror” and the international representations of Muslims and Middle Easterners as associated herewith contributes to this. It is clear that the stereotypes my respondents challenge are not only racial, but gendered. Paradoxically, racial categories are also mobilized and reflected in my respondents’ practices of self-representation through oppositional styles. On one level, this effort is meant to utilize American systems of classification for purposes of inclusion on the basis of minority difference. It also goes beyond that into styles and forms of self-identification among young people. Gendered modes of representation are also used. My women respondents tend to make this a more explicit part of their self-representations than the men. The recurrent goal is that of representing the diversity and multivocality existing among Middle Easterners or Iranians and opportunities are sought for challenging and complicating dominant narratives/images. In doing this my respondents seek to shift how their gendered and racialized (and sexualized) bodies are seen by others, as well as shape the collective visibility of Middle Easterners. To some extent my respondents appropriate the racial categories that have been applied to them, doing so as a form of resistance against experiences of racism, sexism, stereotyping, and dehumanizing representations (as well as having been previously invisible as a minority group, as discussed earlier). These are the circumstances under which the category of Middle Eastern as non-white gains acceptance. However, while mobilizing racial categories in a paradoxical response to racism, there are also cases of my respondents using and talking about media productions that go beyond explicit self-categorizations as non-white. Nevertheless, the role of the body and its representation in various media formats is central to the experiences of being seen and seeing themselves as Iranian American.

The location of race and racial difference in the body is approached in two ways in the examples I have given in this section. On the one hand, racial difference is seen as a stable quality of one's body. It is a truth that young people come to see at a young age in moments when their bodies are a source of derision, for instance, and their non-whiteness is revealed to them. At the same time, their racial difference comes into being through the way they are seen, and it changes according to the visibility of their difference in particular contexts. So it is important to them to be involved in the production of media representations of Middle Easterners though without this category being applied as a limiting label. In this way, they are geared toward positioning themselves within broad and consolidating claims to non-whiteness, but also efforts that thwart such racial categorizations.

The role of web applications discussed in this section are varied incorporations of creative productions like documentary film, performance art, and literary writing into websites, blogs, and social media applications. The gendered racialization of Iranian Americans (as Middle Easterners) is an important theme that ties these productions and web uses together. It also shows that web use among these young people primarily reinforces rather than effaces the role of the body in digital representations of self. It represents a re-embodiment of Iranian American-ness that is self-authored. While my respondents' work largely involves non-fictional genres and documentary style productions (as in Justin's film or the photography exhibit, *Document*), it also includes some humor, parody, and fiction (as in Amitis' *Sand Ninja* and Poro-chista's novel). These productions are characterized by a focus on people's own life stories, intimate experiences, and political stances. And the styles they give these are according to the particular genres, media, and form with which they have expertise and experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed my second generation respondents' claims to difference in the context of the racialization of Middle Easterners and Muslims living in the US. I did this by focusing on their practices of self-representation in their broader media environments, and paying special attention to web use in this regard. The current atmosphere of heightened visibility of Iranians as Middle Easterners and *de facto* Muslims with racialized bodies shapes how my respondents' use internet.¹⁷⁴ My discussion has supported research cautioning against assumptions about the disappearing body (and with it race and gender) in studies of internet-mediated self-representation:

The Internet is certainly an infrastructure and a medium that seemed to many to be race free or color blind but is in fact imbued with racial politics as a result of the digital inequalities evident in its demographics, its political economy, and its content. It has also become an increasingly active purveyor of images of race as well as narratives about them (Nakamura, 2007: 87).

This perspective responds to early speculations about internet media obliterating inequalities of race and gender. The discussion in this chapter demonstrated how my respondents used internet as a “purveyor of images of race” and “narratives about them,” primarily by engaging in production that reflected their own personal experiences, but also those of other Iranian Americans in their environment. I have shown how they claim collective difference through various uses of internet media.

The role of internet is less one of changing the relationship of identity to the body (as argued by some digital media scholars - see introduction of this chapter) than internet media becoming part of my respondents' projects to position themselves. They position

¹⁷⁴ Understanding the way internet media is involved in this process has been focused mostly on the use of internet by Muslims (see the extensive work of Gary Bunt (e.g. 2000, 2003)), and ethnic groups that have very different historical migration trajectories than Iranians in the US (e.g. Brouwer, 2006). Less so has this work engaged directly with the notions of race and racialization in increasingly internet-mediated everyday circumstances (for exceptions see Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2011; Leurs, Midden, & Ponzanesi, 2011).

themselves against elements of Islamophobia that persistently question their belonging to American-ness. And those who are Muslim additionally are confronted with the fact that many first-generation Iranian Americans reject Islam as being synonymous with the Islamic Republic. My respondents position themselves through projects of identity politics. On the one hand, racial difference becomes an authentic claim to belonging to Iranian American-ness as well as broader categories of non-whiteness because of its undeniable presence in the body, taking narrated experiences of being seen as different to serve as testimony.

On the other hand, however, such appeals are complicated by the ambivalence that some have towards adopting the strictures that accompany interpellation. For some of my second-generation respondents, Middle Eastern American is a fledgling racial collective identification that grew out of discriminatory categorizations but was appropriated and given legitimacy. However, as I have also shown, there are differences among my respondents along lines of gender, how they position themselves with relation to American nationhood, issues of class and socio-economic inclusion/exclusion. Iranian-American-ness is also striated by a range of alliances that cross-cut it, such as regional (pan-Middle Eastern) and religious (Muslim) identifications, as well as professional/artistic identifications. There are many cross-cutting shades of difference among my second-generation respondents' ways of claiming difference in the context of racialization.

These divergences in who is included into the newly-appropriated categories of difference emerge and blur the boundaries of Iranian American-ness, raising questions about who speaks for this multi-vocal group, and what the supposed power of difference actually is and for whom it is working. There are a variety of ways of being seen as different, and not all of them are celebrated or recognized equally within discourses of multiculturalism and diversity. It is evident that the way in which Iranian American selves are styled in relation to notions of race is in a state of flux. In tandem, the character of racism in the US also undergoes constant change. The tendency of immigrants towards assimilating into whiteness (not only Iranians, as I have discussed above) appears to be giving way to

appeals to the legacy of the civil rights movement. In tandem changes take place that make it increasingly difficult to define and name racism in the so-called post-racial American nation that has the recent historic achievement of electing a black president.

As racisms shift and change alongside the emergence of novel web applications, my respondents include these new media formats as extensions of their projects of racial difference-claiming. Positioning themselves against notions of whiteness under which they feel they do not belong, they subvert the persistent practices of whitewashing that they see in many other Iranian Americans (and prominent organizations) and the self-representations they produce. Using their respective platforms and audiences, they are able to promote narratives that claim difference, as much as possible, on their own terms. However, they come up against limits such as official frameworks for minority rights claims, commercially viable media business models, and popularly palatable historical narratives of the multicultural American nation, and expressions of racism in the contemporary US context. Despite their agentive productions, their mobilizations of racial categories of difference are subject to these limitations, as are their media practices of self-representation.

Chapter 4 The Green Movement

Introduction

The hotly disputed June 2009 Presidential election took place in Iran while I was on fieldwork in LA. And in its aftermath the Twitter hashtag, #iranelections, reached number one status in Twitter's top 5 "trending topics."¹⁷⁵ A great bulk of text and images being distributed from and about Iran's protest movement was produced and circulated after the election results were announced, and social media applications played a central part in how most of my respondents engaged with the developments in Iran during this time on a day-to-day, and on some days hourly basis. As I observed, social media applications played a role in this event in a variety of ways, and this was reflected in the literature focusing on the developments of this important period. Firstly (and of clear importance from the diaspora vantage point from which I conducted fieldwork) social media had a significant part in news coverage of the events. As el-Nawawy sates in his discussion of the international news coverage of the 2009 elections, "the news media, particularly Internet, webcams, blogs, and Twitter, played a critical role in the coverage of this election and its aftermath" (El-Nawawy, 2010: 3).

Secondly, the role of social media for those in the Iranian diaspora held significance for people's sense of identification with those in Iran. Alexanian states, in her examination of "how Iranians have used social media to connect to the events in Iran as a form of activism and in the performance of Iranian identities," that "the use of social media became central

¹⁷⁵ This status is reached by a Twitter hashtag when it has the most new tweets that include it within the 140 characters allowed.

to the emerging narrative about the potential for revolution or social change” (Alexanian, 2011: 425). This was based on her study of Iranians in LA and Toronto, which I noticed had parallels to the case of my own respondents, many of whom used social media intensively around this event, and talked about its role in the developments. Thirdly, “the internet” (including social media applications and key websites but also a wider range of technologies primarily including encryption softwares) took on the status of a newsworthy thing in itself. This was the case in coverage and analyses provided by a range of broadcast, print, and internet media sources but also the more fringe or niche media such as certain blogs and tech publications. That is, this was not only a time when web applications were *used* intensively by my respondents connecting with the events in Iran, but it was also a time when stories *about internet* came strongly to the fore.

This was an event that quickly accrued an international audience, making it a talking point beyond Iranian American circles, with photographs and video footage of young people in the streets of Tehran and other cities reaching my respondents’ televisions and radios as well as their computer screens, sometimes live and in real-time. The election aftermath and the street protests that ensued became a global media event, and on this global stage, what came to be known as Iran’s Green Movement (Jombesh-e Sabz) was framed in mainstream news coverage¹⁷⁶ as being intimately tied up with social media platforms’ potentialities for revolutionary change.¹⁷⁷ I noticed a strong tendency in news reports towards referring to the role of social media as an instigator or catalyst of protest, usually referred to as an

¹⁷⁶ Whether this focused on the attacks of the Iranian government on internet usership (see for instance: the Wallstreet Journal Evgeny, Morozov “The Digital Dictatorship,” <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703983004575073911147404540> (accessed 29/11/14) or PBS:Rezvanieh, Farvartish, “Pulling the strings of the net: Iran’s cyber army,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/02/pulling-the-strings-of-the-net-irans-cyber-army.html> (accessed 29/11/14)) or on the role of internet in Iranian democracy (see for example BBC: Shiels, Maggie, “On Iran’s virtual front line” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8186761.stm> (accessed 29/11/14), ABC News: Setrakian, Lara, “Iran’s pres. candidates recognize the web as a go-to to win” <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/Mideast/story?id=7605453>, (accessed 29/11/14), and the Washington Times, “Editorial: Iran’s Twitter Revolution,” <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution/>

¹⁷⁷ Earlier moments like this included the Moldovan post-elections protests in which social media were also thought to play an important role. Though those protests received a fraction of the international press coverage of Iran’s Green Movement and “Twitter revolution”.

organizing tool for street demonstrations, or a space for political dissent among Iranians in Iran. I observed a range of perspectives among my respondents and others I spoke to in everyday settings during this time about how far democratic social change in Iran could be attributed to social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. At the same time people were highly aware of the extent of their own reliance on various Web communications to stay updated. I came to see the commonsense understandings about these web applications as powerful narratives about the significance of social media under the oppressive Iranian regime and with relation to how people talked about and understood notions of democracy and freedom. In the midst of these narratives about the events in Iran, my respondents were in a situation that was completely new to them; this was the first time in their lives that they felt they were witness to major social and political upheaval in Iran, albeit from a distance.

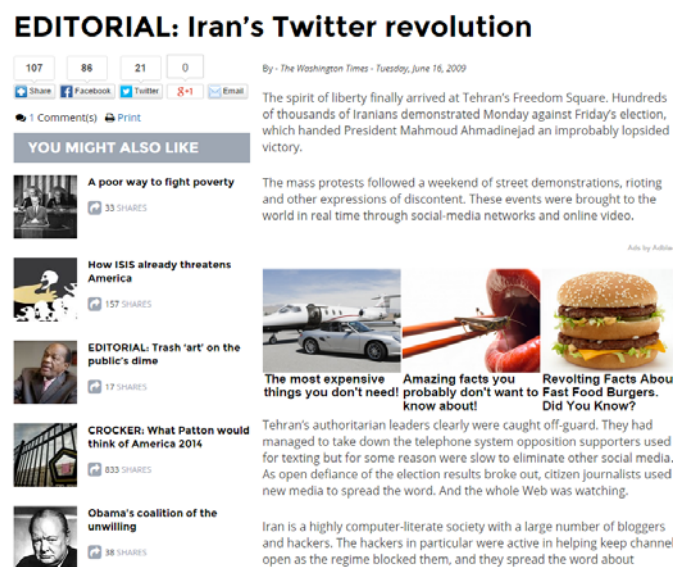


Figure 9 Washington Times June 2009 headline, screenshot from July 2014

These factors laid fertile ground for the narrative of the “Twitter Revolution” to take root and flourish. Versions of the term appeared in journalistic, government, and commonplace accounts of the Iranian post-election period (not only in mainstream news media like Time

Magazine and CNN but at the time the phrase Twitter Revolution was part of common parlance, including in critique)¹⁷⁸. Basically, this narrative advanced the notion that social media (Twitter in particular) had been responsible for or otherwise contributed to the emergence of this pro-democracy movement. The “Twitter Revolution” narrative was propagated, publicized, contested, and countered in various ways. This was especially the case during this period of weeks during which Iran was prominently and consistently in the news. In the previous chapters of this dissertation I presented discussions based on the use of internet in thoroughly unspectacular contexts of everyday usage, where internet use was woven indistinguishably into the fabric of daily practices. I focus in this chapter on my LA-based respondents’ practices around the time of the rise of the Green Movement as a result of the post-election political turmoil in 2009 Iran. In contrast to the other chapters, this period is marked by a high profile global media event, one in which digital media played a role that seemed elevated and separate from the everyday, mundane usage.



Figure 10 Headline on Huffington Post site from July 2009, screenshot from July 2014

¹⁷⁸ See for instance Guardian UK article from June 2010: Weaver, Matthew, “Iran’s Twitter revolution was exaggerated, says editor” <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/09/iran-twitter-revolution-protests> (accessed 29/11/14)



Figure 11 June 2010 article in Guardian UK critically looking back on "Twitter Revolution" narrative, screenshot from July 2014

The "Twitter Revolution" narrative was in some ways specific to Twitter's role in Iran. However, it also reflected broader, longer-running, and commonplace ideas about internet technologies defying oppressive governments, creating interconnections between people in distant parts of the world, and signifying a clear break with older media forms. It also reflected everyday stories about the relationship between social media and social movements – or in anthropologist Gabriella Coleman's terms, "digital activism" (2010).¹⁷⁹ I became interested in these stories about social media as they circulated in my field site with bewildering intensity during the period around the elections.

¹⁷⁹ This relationship has garnered increasing scholarly attention (see most recently: Cammaerts, Mattoni, & McCurdy, 2013; Milan, 2013).

I highlight three main narratives that circulated in the aftermath of the hotly disputed Presidential elections of 2009 and during the protest movement that it spurred. These are narratives about possibilities of virtually “being there” or mediated presence, the possibilities for “internet democracy,” and social media’s ability to go beyond its own supposed “shallowness.” In the discussion of each of these narratives, an opposition emerges that I find useful for understanding the contestations over social media applications. These are: social media as channeling proximity versus distance; the state versus people as the rightful users/regulators of social media access; shallowness versus depth of (emotional) connections afforded by social media. Rather than dichotomies, these oppositions are useful for understanding how my diaspora respondents feel connected/disconnected from Iran through their use of web applications at this pivotal moment. Underlying each of the dominant narratives discussed is the idea that web usage brings immediacy (of presence, control, and emotional connection). And hence, I treat the contestation of these narratives as a starting point to understanding the extent to which social media applications bring immediacy.

The notion that web applications enhance immediacy is not limited only to news, government, and lay narratives about the web. It is also shared by scholars who argue that communications technologies are becoming increasingly able to simulate reality. This concerns the wider issue of mediation that media scholars from various disciplines have addressed. The concept of “remediation” is relevant in that it encompasses that people’s media usage reflects a need for experiencing reality as immediate (i.e. erasing the media), while also acknowledging the contradictory tendency for this experience to become hypermediate (i.e. for the user to become highly aware of the media in use) (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). As Bolter and Grusin argue, these two tendencies do not compete against one another, but are part of the same process of remediation in which new media forms take up older ones (or vice versa) to create increasingly immediate experiences. However, they also argue that remediation brings people ever closer to an experience of immediacy with each new communications technological development.

In this chapter I delve into particular instances of usage, delving into how people implement and make sense of their own practices involving social media. Rather than assuming that these applications bring people closer to democracy, the truth, or deep meaning, I try to understand how they develop new sensitivities, new literacies, new creative forms of expression, and new logics of media usage. I show that a sense of immediacy is compelling for users in certain situations, and that this primarily relies on the aesthetics of the mediated experience. But, in other instances, people doubt the supposed immediacy of their web use. (Greater) immediacy is thus not simply attributable to the newness of the web applications my respondents use. In the diaspora connection with Iran that my respondents experience, I explore the oscillation between experiencing web use as bringing immediacy on the one hand, and giving users a sense of partial, mediated, or filtered version of events on the other. I start the next section of this chapter by sketching the strong narrative that was mobilized in this case, and which linked web applications with democratization in Iran, and its foreign policy implications that also colored the news coverage of the 2009 protests.

Connecting with “the Iranian people”

Internet and international solidarity

In the summer of 2009, San Francisco computer programmer, Austin Heap, was moved to involve himself in the Iranian Green movement. Without any prior knowledge about or interest in Iran, Heap designed *Haystack*, a program which encrypts all online activity and hides this encrypted data in what looks like normal traffic. Heap’s inspiration was the many images he saw from the protests, and his only link to the events was through his internet use. As the tech site, Fast Company, reported in 2010 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton praised Haystack and described the software as working “in the interests of American

values and American strategic concerns.”¹⁸⁰ On April 13th 2010, the US Treasury Department gave Heap an exemption from US sanctions to distribute *Haystack* legally in Iran. This was part of a wider policy approach that saw a ban lifted on US companies like Google and Microsoft to export their products to Iran in March of the same year with the idea that this would facilitate the development of Iranian civil society.¹⁸¹ However, for the many Iranian citizens who were able to access these programs illegally already, the lifting of this ban had little if any effect.

The connections between the US government and solidarity actions with Iran quickly came under public scrutiny in the case of much-covered delay in Twitter maintenance when the Iran protests were just breaking out in June 2009. The State Department was widely reported to have asked the private company, Twitter, to instate a maintenance delay so that Iranians could continue to use Twitter at Iran’s peak traffic hours (the company later denied that the State Department had a hand in their decision to delay maintenance for the sake of Iranians). Since its initiation, the *Haystack* project has fizzled out in relative silence to its loud introduction, as it was later found to be fraught with security holes. As tech-commentators exposed, the program endangered the very people it was meant to protect by concealing their identities as users.¹⁸² In these instances of policy change and action on the part of US government agencies around the Iranian protests, digital technologies were central.

In the case of Heap’s *Haystack*, part of the narrative about internet was one that saw the Californian startup being entrenched in the ideals of a brave new world in which technology was meant to deeply transform society. The respective books of Fred Turner

¹⁸⁰ Ungerleider, Neal, “How Haystack risked exposing Iranian dissidents,” (accessed 29/11/14) <http://www.fastcompany.com/1690075/how-haystack-risked-exposing-iranian-dissidents>. See also the report on the endangering of Iranian citizens: The Economist, “Worse than useless: an American attempt to help Iranian dissidents backfires,” <http://www.economist.com/node/17043440> (accessed 29/11/14)

¹⁸¹ Bonn, C.F., “21st Century Statecraft,” http://www.economist.com/blogs/babbage/2010/05/censorship_iran (accessed 29/11/14)

¹⁸² Morozov, Evgeny, “The Great Internet Freedom Fraud,” http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/09/16/the_great_internet_freedom_fraud?page=0.0 (accessed 29/11/14)

(2010) and John Markoff (2005) on the history of what would become California's Silicon Valley have been influential in documenting the intricate connections between the San Francisco 1960s and 70s "counterculture," and the birth of the first personal computers as it coincided with these cultural developments. The societally transformative visions for computer technologies have culminated in what Barbrook and Cameron refer to as "the Californian Ideology." This term is used to simultaneously reflect the "disciplines of market economics and the freedoms of hippie artisanship" for which San Francisco has come to be known; a rugged individualism that allows liberties to be expressed within the free marketplace while seeking to reduce the power of the nation-state (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996).¹⁸³ Observing the Iranian uprising of 2009 from California, I noticed the narrative of the Californian startup merge with the narrative of international solidarity with pro-democracy protesters in Iran, bringing to the fore notions of a technology-driven democratic change shorthanded terms like "Twitter revolution" (and Facebook revolution).¹⁸⁴

This merging may have been facilitated by the longer-running narrative cultivated in the mainstream US press about Iranians and their use of internet media against a repressive government, which began especially during the rise of blogging in Iran during the first term of the George W. Bush administration. Internet media's connection to democratic change in Iran had been cultivated since the early 2000s, with the coverage of Iranian dissident blogger-journalists being driven to the free spaces of the internet in regionally disproportionate numbers, and experiencing persecution for their online, anti-regime endeavours. The stories of persecuted bloggers like Sina Motallebi and Hossein Derakhshan were invoked, as was that of Omid Reza Mir Sayafi, the first Iranian blogger to die in prison.¹⁸⁵ In the same period, the Bush administration pushed the Iran Freedom

¹⁸³ Bert Barendrecht gives the following definition of the California Ideology: "a contradictory mix of the left's liberal society and the right's liberal marketplace" (Barendrecht, 2013).

¹⁸⁴ See Sreberny & Khiabany (2010) for an overview and critique of the Western media coverage of the proposed "Twitter Revolution" phenomenon.

¹⁸⁵ The blogger was reported to have taken his own life in Evin prison in early 2009. The prisoner's doctor reportedly stated that his death was the result of the medication Mir Sayafi had taken and the prison staff's

Support Act, which was passed in September, 2006. The serendipitous overlap between the rise of the internet's role in Iranian civil society and the US regime-change agenda seemed to strengthen both. The Iranian uprising and the attention that Heap's project received¹⁸⁶ was a novel moment in which it was difficult to discern boundaries between the commercial world of the technological startup business, philanthropic solidarity initiative taking support action for protesters in Iran, and the US government's foreign policy efforts oriented towards technology-based intervention.

The notion of personal technologies being the key to freedom is not limited to Iran's case. Turner argues that early perceptions about computers and the internet were shaped less by the engineers and programmers who made them and more by an elite of journalists and hippie ideologues from 1960s and 70s San Francisco who had the access and influence to write about these new technologies. The narratives generated around internet at that time were intended "to create the cultural conditions under which microcomputers and computer networks could be imagined as tools of liberation." Given Turner's account, it is not hard to connect narratives that conjure up images of a quest for freedom around internet with the dominant news narratives about the Iranian uprising. This fusion between commerce¹⁸⁷ and activist solidarity is reflective of the arguments of legal and internet scholar, Yochai Benkler (2006). He discusses internet as constitutive of modern capitalism through its role in the creation of new patterns of production that are non-market based but patterns of "social production and exchange." In this view, economic and technological developments blur historical lines of demarcation between commercial

refusal to provide Mir Sayafi with the necessary medical attention immediately thereafter. Parsa, Telma, Mir-Sayafi: Iranian blogger's writings bring him to life," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/03/20/mir-sayafi-iranian-blogger_n_177553.html (accessed 29/11/14)

¹⁸⁶ He was awarded the innovator of the year award by the Guardian UK.

¹⁸⁷ My meaning with the notion of commerce here refers not to the business structures behind the projects in question per se, but to the Californian start-up atmosphere more generally. San Francisco, home to key nodes in the tech industry like silicon valley and mountain view have become international symbols for successful venture capitalist models for investment in technological development and innovation. These centers are also geographically proximate to the San Franciscan symbolic capitol of progressive activism. This combination is what lends this place its dual commercial and grassroots/activist associations as a center in the US and internationally.

production, public sector provision, and community/non-profit sector (see also Flew, 2008). The lines of community and international solidarity through activist networks appear to cross those of commercial production, as well as those of foreign policy in ways that are neither new, nor specific to Iran.

Quoting a Forbes Magazine journalist, Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) write, “whatever the outcomes of the Iranian protests... it is already obvious these have been good for Twitter’s business” (2010: 175). Software companies like Twitter and Facebook were indeed given a great deal of attention in the news at this time. One of the central concerns in the coverage was that social media sites like Twitter and Facebook were being censored, or that they were playing a role in the protests¹⁸⁸ (Heap’s software intervention was celebrated as allowing users to access Twitter, which was blocked for many before that. Whether this was the main purpose Iranians used *Haystack* for is not clear). Within this news media environment, it became difficult to separate narratives about the possibilities of internet technologies in general from the attention for the social media companies that were at the heart of the stories about change and possibility in Iran.

The blurring of boundaries between activist solidarity, US government interests, and a conventionally commercial tech sector was seen as natural by many of my respondents, and was largely welcomed. Here I have discussed an instance of this blurring of sector and power lines. In the following I discuss similar merging in the case of “digital diplomacy.” I do so to show how this is built on the same notion of “people-to-people” connection that underpins the sentiments around *Haystack* as I described here. I illustrate further in the following how the slippage between US government and civil solidarity efforts with Iranians results in contradictions between the narrative of US government investment in promoting web freedom in Iran, alongside the reality that the outcomes of this same foreign policy sometimes undermine Iranian activists activities.

¹⁸⁸ Sreberny and Khiabany (2010) joined Morozov (2009) in highlighting the lack of importance that Twitter in particular had as a tool for organizing protests in Iran.

The Web as a tool of diplomacy

Digital technologies have a fast-expanding role in American international diplomacy. This is evident in a series of efforts by the US State Department - headed by Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton - that fall under the banner of 21st Century Statecraft, which is thought to be the future of American foreign diplomacy as waged through “soft power.” Clinton’s foreign policy approach has made the bold change of placing digital technologies at the center of US diplomacy and development policy, with a range of projects being unrolled under the ideal of global internet freedom. While the scope of the new efforts is broad, the efforts were presented as a challenge to Iran and China in particular.¹⁸⁹ An important part of the strategy behind these technologically-oriented measures is to develop what the US State Department has called “people-to-people engagement” - rather than engagement between diplomats alone - when it comes to citizens of countries with diplomatic tensions with the US.

An example of such engagement was seen with the launch of the American “Virtual Embassy” to Iran. Despite its invocation of the institutional form of an embassy, The Virtual Embassy of the United States, Tehran, Iran is essentially a website, in both Persian and English, which provides information for Iranians inside Iran, and outside. Aside from offering information about travel visas, studying abroad in the US, services to US citizens in Iran, and news and political analysis, the homepage also links to listed descriptions of Hollywood films in the “American movies corner” and current episodes of the political satire show “Poetik” hosted by well-known diaspora Iranian television satirist, Kambiz Hosseini. The homepage also links to the Embassy’s social media accounts on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Wordpress, all in Persian. The accounts have the user ID “USA dar Farsi” (USA in Persian). The virtual embassy was a development following from of the

¹⁸⁹ Ammori, Marvin, “Obama’s Unsung Tech Hero,” <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marvin-ammori/two-years-in-obamas-tech-b-813127.html> (accessed 29/11/14)

State Department's creation of USAdarFarsi Twitter account and Facebook page that encouraged communication with people inside Iran.



Figure 12 USAdarFarsi, screenshot from October 2013

While the initiative has been acknowledged by Iranian American organizations like PAAIA and NIAC as a step towards filling a communication gap, these bodies also note that this effort does not constitute a formal diplomatic mission, and should be seen more as a platform for communication between the US government and the Iranian people. NIAC's official statement reads:

The State Department says they “want to encourage travel to the United States” through the effort. However, the website does not replace services that a brick and mortar embassy would provide, such as visas—meaning Iranians will still have to travel outside of the country in order to apply to visit the U.S.

NIAC has also been exceedingly active in opposing US sanctions on Iran over the past years, booking various diplomatic victories along the way. NIAC and other individuals have also drawn attention to the fact that since the tightening of US sanctions policy on Iran in the years following 2009, the increasingly targeted and strict measures framed as a source of

pressure on the Iranian government's nuclear program also impact the ICT sector in Iran. For instance, in September 2013, the website of politician and opposition party leader at the time of the 2009 elections, Mehdi Karoubi, was shut down by the Just Host service at the request of the US Treasury Department. The hosting services of the US company were deemed in violation of the sanctions because American companies are restricted from providing goods and services to Iranians, and this extends to offering hosting services to websites with the domain suffix, .ir.¹⁹⁰ Parsi has also argued that U.S. sanctions make it difficult in many ways for progressive civil society in Iran to use internet technologies to flourish in their work (2010).

These sanctions on technological goods and services have also been documented as reaching the diaspora. An earlier case of the commercial sanctions application was that of second-generation Iranian American teenager, Sahar Sabet's experience of being denied the right to purchase a iPad in an Apple store in Georgia in 2012 because the store clerk had heard her speaking Persian to a relative. Sabet's case triggered numerous other cases of denial of Apple products to Iranian American customers to surface i.e. cases of denial to sell electronic goods in Santa Monica and Sacramento, California.¹⁹¹ A number of my respondents expressed concern about these reports via their Facebook pages, raising issues of racial and ethnic profiling. In 2013, the sanctions that interfered with the sale of consumer communication devices, software, and services for Iranians were lifted by the Obama Administration.¹⁹² This move followed the earlier Iranian Digital Empowerment Act (IDEA),¹⁹³ which proposed the partial easing of these sanctions in 2010 (as mentioned

¹⁹⁰ BBC, "Iran social media block removed by technical hitch," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-24125340> (accessed 1/12/14)

¹⁹¹ Abdi, Jamal, "Sanctions and the genius bar," http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/12/opinion/why-is-apple-discriminating-against-iranian-americans.html?_r=0 (accessed 1/12/14)

¹⁹² NIAC Staff, "NIAC applauds lifting communications sanctions for Iranians," <http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=9263> (accessed 1/12/14)

¹⁹³ According to the Open Congress site that allows the following legislation in Congress, The Iranian Digital Empowerment Act is officially summarized stating that: "the export of the following software and related services to Iran by U.S. persons may not be prohibited or restricted: (1) software and related services that allow private Iranian citizens to circumvent online censorship and monitoring efforts imposed by the government of Iran and (2) software and related services that enable personal communication by the Iranian people. Excludes from such provisions the export of such software and related services to the government of

earlier in this chapter) including the Congressional initiative to correct the internet restrictions of US sanctions.

NIAC was one of the main Iranian American organizations that drew attention to the inconsistencies between the US internet freedom policies and their sanctions measures, placing their policy analysis in a wider framework highlighting the ineffectiveness of sanctions on Iran for diplomatic outcomes. In line with this, Morozov's commentary in 2011 in the context of the Tunisian uprising is relevant. Amidst heightened attention for social media in that case he raised questions about the stark contradictions concerning internet freedom and American foreign policy in the Middle East, stating in a published interview that, "You cannot say, 'We want to promote internet freedom,' when every single other branch of the US government wants to promote the opposite."¹⁹⁴ The central idea behind 21st Century Statecraft is that internet access is important for "freedom" and "democracy." However, despite massive speculation, without extensive research about usage inside Iran, it remains difficult to know how important internet was in the proceedings around the 2009 elections and in which particular ways. While such research extends beyond the scope of this project focused on the diaspora, it suffices to point out the inconsistencies between the policy discourse of American internet freedom initiatives on the one hand, and the constant oscillations between relative diplomatic and strictly militaristic approaches to Iran on the other.

It is nevertheless noteworthy that in the 2013 Iranian Presidential election campaign that resulted in the electoral victory of progressive cleric, Hassan Rouhani, the role of internet

Iran." "Digital Empowerment Act," <http://www.opencongress.org/bill/hr4301-111/show> (accessed 1/12/14)

¹⁹⁴ Gilson, Dave, "The Tunisia Twitter Revolution that wasn't,"

<http://www.motherjones.com/media/2011/01/evgeny-morozov-twitter-tunisia> (accessed 1/12/14).

Drawing on Morozov's statement, it seems that the US narrative on internet freedom in Iran seems isolated from the rest of US foreign policy, treating internet as an exceptional and neutral issue. Meanwhile, the US narrative on Iranian freedom was reinterpreted and turned around by Iranian authorities. The Iranian government under Ahmadinejad had expressed repeated concerns about the interest the US showed in supporting citizens' access web technologies to Iran, drawing attention to the funding of projects and policies as signs of foreign intervention into Iran's sovereign affairs by way of internet.

in the campaign was relatively small. This has since also led to recent diplomatic breakthroughs between Iran and the US that are unprecedented since 1979. Again, interestingly, during the election period many social media applications remained blocked in Iran since 2009, and as the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania's 2013 report on the work of Iranian journalists in Iran stated:

Given the restricted access to online media, Iran's print press played a more prominent role throughout the 2013 campaign. Although Iran's state-run broadcast media—which is managed by pro-regime loyalists—is the dominant source of news for Iranians, and the only media that hosts presidential debates, the country's print media culture is remarkably prolific, offering a range of information and opinions from across Iran's political spectrum. Iran's print press has traditionally served as not only important campaign tools for candidates—both reformists and conservatives—but also as key resources for more diverse election news, debates and analyses for Iranian citizens.¹⁹⁵

While very little research has covered the political role of internet alongside and in comparison with other media in Iran, insights from the work of Khiabany and Sreberny (Khiabany & Sreberny, 2007; A. Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010) suggest that the role of internet in Iranian civil society is best understood within the historical context of the press in Iran and the important role of journalists as a key actors in Iranian civil society. The local and national press has long been an important driving force for democratic participation and in Iran, and internet usage by journalists in response to the closing of newspapers and other harassment by the Iranian government (A. Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010) reflects the interrelationship between the use of conventional media forms and internet. Furthermore, the continued importance of other media forms - despite digital media's proliferation in Iran - is evident from key reports generated recently on the situation regarding media and information in Iran.

¹⁹⁵ *Facing Boundaries, Finding Freedom: an in-depth report on Iranian journalists working in Iran* by Magdalena Wodjciechzak, Amy Brouillette, and Briar Smith, Summer 2013

Television broadcasts in general remain the most important source of information for those sampled in The Iran Media Program's 2011-2012 report on media consumption in Iran, conducted in collaboration with the Annenberg School of Media. The report focused solely on Iran, stating that 96% of those asked chose television as the top source for news, following by press (45%) and friends and family (38%).¹⁹⁶ Internet was not among the top three news sources that people listed. And despite the official illegality of foreign-based satellite television consumption and the unofficial "jamming" of signals by the Iranian government, satellite television has been said to be at least as significant a source of information and entertainment for those inside Iran as internet is, if not more so. This is according to a recent report by the London-based non-profit organization, Small Media, specifically detailing satellite jamming in Iran.¹⁹⁷

The picture this paints of media, journalism, and information in Iran is one of internet as fulfilling certain purposes with relation to the existing institutional frameworks and political and media practices of people. It also reflects a very different picture than the popular "Twitter revolution" narrative of the democratization of Iran through technology-driven action. The more nuanced picture of internet in Iran also complicates the assumptions behind "21st Century Statecraft" that highlight the importance of breaking through a technological divide (evident through selectively blocked or curbed web access in Iran) that is willfully kept in place by the Iranian government that once bridged could have transformative effects on citizens' democratic participation. This policy approach seems not to address the idiosyncrasies of the political and media circumstances that shape usage, inevitably compounding the simple technical blockage. As Franklin states:

The emergent digital divide has various shades and hues. It is not defined purely by the absence or presence of Internet connections... It reproduces the long-standing one between rich and poor worlds, former colonizers and their former colonies,

¹⁹⁶ Wojcieszak, et al. "Finding a way: How Iranians reach for news and information," <http://www.global.asc.upenn.edu/fileLibrary/PDFs/FindingaWay.pdf> (accessed 1/12/14).

¹⁹⁷ Small Media, "Satellite Jamming: A War Over Airwaves," <http://issuu.com/smallmedia/docs/satjam> (accessed 1/12/14).

between industrialized and nonindustrialized societies. But it is not monolithic, nor is it evenly distributed. Closing the divide cannot be done in a culturally universalistic way either, for how and what constitutes it is a sociocultural and political economic question as much as it is a technical and representational one. For some, it is a question of what, if any equipment; for others, the degree and capacity of transmission networks; for others, relative skill and access to computers, cables, and software that are mutually compatible and/or related to actual needs and social fabrics (Franklin, 2004: 224).

If the digital divide is not only a technological issue but a political and social one, then internet freedom in Iran is not a simple matter of access to internet technologies. It is then a matter of freedom to publish content uncensored, and freedom to use the particular applications and platforms that are of most immediate use and relevance to their needs and lives. For instance, the extreme popularity of the photo sharing site Orkut has been noted in reports on Iranian internet usage to be outstanding.¹⁹⁸ Aided by its previous popularity, the site was used during the protests in 2009 to spread photos of the protests and street violence through the uploading of photos from mobile devices to user accounts. This extreme popularity is difficult to explain solely on the basis of the technical attributes of the program or the government lenience in its control (controls which are already consistently circumvented by many through the use of proxies). Internet's role in Iranian civil society seems to rely as much on the particularities of what makes a certain web application popular to use as on the technological access to and fluency that users have with the application.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ "A 2005 study of a popular multinational online community called Orkut reported that the site listed 11.4 million users. Of that number, Iranians made up about 340,000, the third most common nationality on the list" (Carafano, n.d.). This report references the work of Hazir Rahmandad *et al.*, "Iranians on Orkut: Trends and Characteristics," Iranian Studies Group at MIT, January 2006, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹⁹ Alongside Orkut, Akhavan (2013) discusses the social media site, Friendfeed, as being somewhat uniquely popular in Iran, while also noting the relative lack of attention for this popularity in international news and scholarship that prefers to focus on the role of other social media sites inside Iran such as Facebook and Twitter. This further suggests that the coverage of the movement was largely influenced by the applications that were already popular and recognizable in the US and the West more generally.

In Iran, certain sites are indeed blocked and the range of blocked sites changes with political circumstances and leadership in the country. However, as I have argued here, a US foreign policy approach that imposes sanctions in order to force greater “internet freedom” in the foreign policy interest of greater “democratization” of Iran seems flawed in various respects. I have shown how the assumptions behind this policy narrative frame the web as a single entity and an unmediated channel between Iranians in Iran and citizens outside. This relies in part on certain foreign policy discourses that are worth discussing in the following, paying attention to the literature on internet in Iran from the perspective of foreign powers.

American foreign policy perceptions of Iranian internet

Discourses about internet (freedom) and Iranian citizens are the mainstay of much of the journalism in conjunction with the reformist/green movement, along with the news media’s coverage of Iranian religious leaders in the context of nuclear concerns in many Western countries. At times, these discourses come to overlap when the anti-nuclear sanctions that effect the Iranian population are framed within the same discourse as freedom for Iranian people from their regime that internet freedom consistently is (Bajoghli, 2012). In addition, the Iranian “blogosphere” is a consistent topic of international attention and scholarly research (Alexanian, 2011; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2004; Doostdar, 2004; Kelly & Etling, 2008; Rahimi, 2011; Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010) Amir-Ebrahimi, as is “Electronic Iran” more broadly (Akhavan, 2013).

Scholarly work on internet media usage *inside* Iran typically focuses on blogging, often referring to the potential (or lack thereof) for social, cultural, and political dissents

(see Batouli 2004)²⁰⁰ or ‘cyber-dissidence’ (Rahimi, 2003, 2011) for challenging Iran’s Islamic regime, and for minorities and women to access the public sphere (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2004). The theme of transgression via internet is also evident in Doostdar’s unique ethnography of Persian language blogs within the Iranian context sees these as an emergent speech genre (2004). He discusses how different groups come to discursively frame this internet practice as “vulgar” in weblog-based debates; both in the sense of Islamic morality, and with respect to its allegedly perverse effects on Persian language(2004). And the blurring of boundaries between public and private spaces through internet media usage by Iranians has been a theme in much research, including the diaspora (M. Graham & Khosravi, 1997). In contrast, research has largely left the ways the government uses the same digital media under-researched. Nikki Akhavan’s important work on the relationship of the Iranian government to digital media has shown that two relatively separate branches of a policy are in effect, which means that both surveillance and control on the one hand, and use for production on the other are in effect in Iran.

Outside Iran there is also a significant number of bloggers who are considered to have a role within the Persian blogosphere, and who blog predominantly in Persian (Kelly & Etling, 2008). The research on internet and Iranian diaspora has also focused on first-generation or has been non-specific with regard to generation (J. A. Alexanian, 2011; van den Bos, 2006). The growth of studies on LA Iranians also reflects an increase in “cultural” organization in contrast with long-distance Iranian politics, as anything “political” was deemed divisive and even dangerous because of its associations with the Iranian regime and political landscape (Ghorashi, 2004; Shahidian, 2000; van den Bos, 2006). However, this is increasingly displaced by more explicitly politically oriented organizations that define “politics” in terms of US party and electoral politics and encourage new forms of participation in the US (see Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009; Motlagh, 2008; Ghorashi, 2007). Alongside this there is a context of increased diaspora political engagement with Iran, not

²⁰⁰ Batouli, Ali. 2004. “The free Internet: An Instrument of Control”. Boothe Prize for Excellence in Writing, Stanford University, Spring 2004. <http://boothepriize.stanford.edu/0405/boothe0405.pdf> (accessed 1/12/14)

within the framework of old political factionalisms but within the framework of “civil society” and “human rights.” Internet becomes an important part of this in the way it is publicly promoted and covered, and also in the way it is practiced through transnational diaspora networks (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009).

When it comes to the web use of the Iranian diaspora, the second generation’s practices have largely been unstudied (for exceptions see Alexanian, 2011; McAuliffe, 2007a). My research demonstrates that the internet practices of second generation diaspora as also worthy of in-depth social scientific and specifically ethnographic investigation. These young people are now coming of age with internet as an inextricable part of their day-to-day lives. These developments give shape to the field in which my respondents position themselves. As I argue, their politics of belonging involves navigating boundaries and modes of inclusion and exclusion while making appeals to their legitimacy as political actors amidst various social forces. The use of internet by these respondents is a reflection of their individual and collective practices of becoming engaged in political spheres that are neither limited to long-distance commitments to Iran nor national civic engagement in the US but which also include inter-ethnic, religious, class-based, regional solidarities, which are also mobilized to make local- and national-level claims to rights and resources.

I argue that the ways internet technologies are used by my respondents reflect complex practices that include a much broader picture than the use of internet as a political tool, i.e. in Iran as a tool of dissidence or in the diaspora as a tool for long-distance repatriation. Rather, as the ethnographic material shows, uses of internet among my respondents cover a range of applications that have to do with their ways of being Iranian American, but which expand the notion of internet as a (diasporic) political tool. In the following I shift from discussing the larger narratives and the assumptions behind them to discussing how my respondents and others in the field talked about web applications in the context of making connections to the events in Iran.

Mediating connections to Iran

On September 8th, 2009 the panel discussion, “New Politics, New Media,” commenced in front of a full house at the USC’s Annenberg School of Journalism. Iranian American, Mahasti Afshar - alongside her co-panelists, Mike Shuster and Roger Cohen - began the debate. The event was convened in the midst of lively public discussions (prior and following), which examined the role of “New Media”/“Social Media,” Twitter, and Facebook as they featured in the uprisings in Iranian cities during the summer of 2009. Mike Shuster was an award-winning diplomatic correspondent for National Public Radio News who travelled frequently to Iran and covered the Middle Eastern conflict in his work. Roger Cohen was a British-born journalist and author with regular columns in the New York Times and International Herald Tribune, among which his writing as a correspondent based in Iran. Mahasti Afshar was an Iranian American observer based in LA who had lived in the US for decades. She had directed various heritage conservation foundations and endowments, and held a PhD in Sanskrit and Indo-European Oral Literature and Mythology from Harvard University.²⁰¹ Cohen was one of very few reporters writing from Iran during the June 2009 Presidential Elections and the street-protest aftermath. His gripping piece, “Iran’s Day of Anguish,” in the New York Times in June, 2009 garnered attention in this period among my Iranian American respondents and other Iranian Americans in LA.

In the discussion, it was revealing to hear how the role of digital media was given meaning by Afshar in the context of the Iranian revolution of 1979. During her opening statement, Afshar highlighted the constitutive role of new media in the “Green Movement” in comparison to that other historical people’s uprising:

In 1979, Khomeini disseminated tapes secretly. In 2009 the opposition used cell phone and online media. The difference between those two media uses actually spells

²⁰¹ Since the event she began serving as Executive Director to PAAIA.

the difference between the essence of these two movements. In '79 one message was preconceived and disseminated secretly through mosques and bazaars. In '09 a message evolved in real time through accidental leaders and regular people having a conversation. The open friendly social media represented the democracy people wanted. The tapes in 79 were about one charismatic leader that dictated a message. End of conversation, beginning of dictatorship.

The comparison between Iran of 1979 and 2009 garnered much analysis during this period. And in the aftermath, scholars of big and small media continued this probing. Media scholar, Annabelle Sreberny, states that seen in historical continuity with the “small media” of '79 (leaflets and cassette tapes that were highly consequential in the revolution) “internet has just become the newest site of contestation and the latest set of technologies to offer an alternative mode of communications to those directly controlled by the state” (A. Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010). Naficy²⁰² has argued regarding the post-election Iranian protests that, “be they old or new, mass media are not in and of themselves sufficient to create revolutions.” He has emphasized that the tragic failure of the movement to achieve its goals suggests that contemporary Iran lacks the political, economic, and social conditions that increase the probability of revolution, rather than any media technologies. While Naficy's and other scholarly work comparing '79 and '09 seeks to historically contextualize the recent events while pointing out the unique affordances, Afshar's above comparison seems to attribute certain inherent democratic qualities to the media forms used by people in '09 in contrast to '79, extrapolating those qualities to the character of the respective movements. In this view, mobile phones, internet media, the demands of the '09 demonstrators, and the organization of the movement itself are seen together as representative of democratic qualities.

This instance reflects the basic narrative about internet and democracy in Iran that undergirded much of the US international diplomacy language I described earlier. And

²⁰² Keynote Speech by Dr. Hamid Naficy at Iranian Alliances Across Borders Annual Conference, November 2012.

most of my second-generation respondents were exposed to these telling abstractions about internet's democratic capabilities. Like Afsar many of them expressed a feverish interest in following the news and updates at this time. Arash, for instance, told me about sources they consulted such as The New York Times' blog, The Lede and Andrew Sullivan's blog for The Atlantic called Daily Dish; sources he consulted during the days following the much-disputed vote in Iran. The photo blog Tehran 24, the popular site Tehran Bureau, and the cultural blog Tehran Avenue were all English language sites that posted content from inside Iran during this period, and which my respondents either talked about visiting or posted things from on their Facebook and/or Twitter accounts. For Arash, such sources offered the trusted and in-depth coverage he was looking for. And for many, social media site, Facebook, was a hub for information around this time when so many of their Facebook friends were posting about the same topics concerning Iran. While many exchanged comments and shared each other's videos, the events being discussed were also a source of "unfriending" during this time, as Pouneh explained to me on the basis of her own verbal altercations with Ahmadinejad supporters. Facebook took on a particular quality during this time, as many of my respondents consistently posted a slew of articles, videos, and photographs about the political situation around the elections. Hakha explained that he sensed that some of his friends might not have the same interest he did in the events he posted about, but said those friends could "hide" him if they wished not to see his posts. Some were wary about the appearance of their fervent sharing practices about Iran during this time. But Hakha and others said they received supportive messages from friends thanking them for the information. Because of these social exchanges and considerations, my respondents' use of Facebook was very different from but closely connected with their use of websites for staying/becoming informed.

Another way Facebook was important to my respondents during this time was for the organizing of events. Facebook was the central way my respondents would find out about art shows, vigils, protests, and other events organized in solidarity with the voters and protesters in Iran. Facebook seemed far more important than a site like Kodoom.com for my respondents. The latter is a site that posts all events of interest to Iranian Americans

around the whole country, and tended to be up to date on many of the events happening in LA, also during this period. Yet, staying up to date with events during this period was primarily done through Facebook. The intense use of Facebook also came with a downside. The application's unique characteristics were turned around due to stories circulating about the ability of Iranian officials to track the social media usage of Iranians outside Iran. Those of my respondents who made relatively regular trips to Iran became worried.

Beeta told me about her concerns based on rumors she had heard about Iranian diaspora who had traveled to Tehran over the summer being asked by officials in the airport to reveal their Facebook profiles and passwords. Pounesh also told me that she was deleting the local events she had attended and took down some of her posts against the Iranian government as a result of these accounts. Just days earlier she had used Facebook to mobilize people around her travel communally with busses to a local voting station, but now her activities on the site had become a negative connection to the events in Iran – a worry that had neither burdened her nor led her to take such measures in the past. I also heard stories from my respondents about others who had started up a “fake” Facebook profile for the purposes of thwarting these alleged government efforts. Because of the profile format that accrues information over time about the user's practices/content production, Facebook became (in contrast to visited websites) a source of uncertainty and concern with regard to the surveillance capabilities of the Iranian government for some.

This emphasized the shifting relationship between these young people and the Iranian state, and the role of internet therein. This change towards apprehension of social media mirrored the turnaround that had happened with the elections. The hopes and involvement in the Iranian elections on the part of some of my respondents, like Pounesh and Beeta who had cast their votes for reformist candidates in the election, changed to disappointment and dismay about the Iranian electoral system and about the consistent reaction to the disputation of the results at the highest levels of Iranian government. These second-generation voters' use of Facebook to organize involvement in the electoral system from LA transformed into resentment towards the Iranian state apparatus. In her research on

internet and diaspora politics, Bernal suggests on the basis of research on the Eritrean diaspora's engagement with political web postings that internet is not simply facilitating communications that pre-existed internet, but that it is "making possible new kinds of communicative spaces and practices." Bernal argues that "new ways of practicing Eritrean politics" develops through websites that engaged with news and analysis inside Eritrea. My respondents' engagement suggests that social media was used for local (not only translocal/transnational) political mobilization, but also that the positioning of the subject and (the changes in) their relationship with the Iranian government is important for whether communicative spaces are opened up through digital media. That is, while young people like Pouneh and Beeta felt included as part of a unified Iranian polity during election time, this was subject to change according to the key political shifts thereafter.

Their motivations for, and types of, internet usage changed with these circumstances, even as the technological possibilities they have access to remain unchanged. So while spaces for political exchange were opened up via social media, the situation reflected Sokefeld's (2006) discussion of diaspora political participation. He argues that social movement theory is useful for understanding how members of the diaspora are formed through their political involvement.

As identities become politically effective only when they are employed and endorsed by a certain number of people, we have to ask how these people are *mobilized* for such an identity, how they are made to accept and assume it. Rather than being regarded as something that from the outset provides continuity and fixed structures for social life, as in primordial approaches, identity becomes an issue of movement and mobilization [emphasis original] (Sokefeld, 2006: 266).

In line with Sokefeld's argument, it appears that rather than social media opening up a transnational space for being part of a unified and transnational Iranian nation, particular developments connect people through action and consciousness to Iran, such that they are moved to assume Iranian-ness. This is due to political and emotional engagement in response to social and political movement. And it is the mediation of the updates from Iran

that mobilize their feelings. This mobilization also hinges on the positioning of those in question. For instance, while many of my respondents did not see themselves as part of the movement in Iran, they positioned themselves in solidarity. It is from this vantage point that they used their social media profiles to express a connection with those in Iran and become part of peer groups that moved one another to a sense of togetherness and connection to Iran through their social media profiles.

This could be seen through the symbols they shared. The first three images below are examples of pictures that most of my respondents changed their Facebook profile photo to. The line of images following those contains two typical photos of street protests in Iran that included the same slogans and even form/design/color in the Facebook photos. The image on the bottom left is a screenshot from the Facebook page of Tehran Bureau that was giving regular updates at the time of the protests via their page. The bottom right image is a photograph I took at one of the street protests in Los Angeles organized by young Iranian American students. These images together show how elements of the message's style and form, as well as its content, were transferred between embodied street gatherings and demonstrations in distant locations as well as instances of web-based self-presentation with very little change between media. This is the case even though the positioning is subtly differentiated with the slogan "where is their vote" that some of my respondents used who did not have Iranian passports. And the protests in West LA were characterized mostly by remaining stationary at one familiar location where protests often take place nearby a main road, rather than the meeting in public squares and staging marches as was the case in Iran. The commonalities shared between the solidarity actions and their target for solidarity in both style and content of the central messages was clear despite these differences.

This reflects the ways in which people became politically and affectively mobilized as part of the diaspora. This is what Baubock describes as being part of transnational politics that diaspora wage in relation to a "homeland" (Baubock, 2009). In the case of my second-generation respondents partaking in these activities, many for the first time in their lives, is

a forging of new connections to an envisaged “homeland.” Their internet news and social media use mediated their political engagement with the political process within the Iranian nation-state, and also became an important way for them to understanding of events. Their Iranian-ness was mobilized in this context, as they were implicated as participants in a national democracy. Though their activities also included organizing locally, shifting sense of citizenship – from the formal to the emotional.



Figure 13 Collection of images from online and offline during the protests. Top 3 are Facebook profile photos of respondents, second row photos shared on social media by respondents and their friends, bottom left screen shot from Tehran Bureau Facebook page I took in June 2009, bottom right photo I took at a rally in Westwood in June 2009.

The period around the Iranian elections made explicit a certain sense of commonality between my respondents and “the people of Iran.” It did so in a way that had not happened before and that involved the intense usage of social media. The unfiltered, unscreened, unmediated quality of these connections to “the people” was an important element of how media messages were perceived and treated by some during this period. This included both media narratives and my respondents expressing their connections with the Iranian context. This quality of social in particular in the case of the Iran protest movement of 2009 is something Morozov touches in his observations about the role of digital media in reporting and journalism during events. In a discussion of the implications of social media usage for the role of traditional foreign correspondents, Morozov sardonically suggests that many saw Twitter as giving Western audiences the possibility of “finally unshackling ourselves from the inherent biases of cigar-smoking and Martini-sipping white men” (Morozov, 2009). According to this assumption, media seem to promise more direct access to this distant pro-democracy movement by virtue of relying on user-generated content from participants in the events themselves. Morozov (2009) challenges this assumption by arguing that social media also distorted the messages of this movement. He draws attention to how misleading news reports (like Andrew Sullivan’s mentioned above) were at first left uncorrected, and were amplified by key members of the Western press to emphasize narratives about the role of social media in a pro-democracy movement. Indeed, as I have argued, narratives about internet and democratization that rely on understandings of internet as a neutral and relatively “free” means of communication. It is and therefore sometimes seen as something of an immediate channel between those inside and outside Iran.

However, a great many of my respondents’ practices of sharing video and textual material via social media applications reflected their reliance on various media formats besides internet for constructing a picture of the events in Iran. Social media appeared to play a particular role among these. As Manoukian points out in the case of Iran and the role of digital media during the 2009 uprisings, the coverage of the events by protesters through social media has not only created a space for expressing dissatisfaction and discussing

dissent. It has also played an important role in reporting the events to wider audiences (Manoukian, 2010). This (self-)reporting role has shaped how the movement is perceived by the outside world. And as Manoukian argues in addition, social media representations of the movement are essential to how this movement is made “real” for these audiences through mediation.

[M]ediation penetrates current forms of political action to the extent that relevance and even “reality” are measured by the media traces actions leave. Photographs, videos, and blogged testimonies are what made the protests real, especially for distant spectators (Manoukian, 2010).

If social media contribute to the “reality” of the protest movement, I would emphasize that this relies in part on the feature of social media being seen as “the people’s” media (being seen as a contributing factor to grass-roots, popular, and participatory democracy). Both the experience of my respondents as having access to certain moments of unfiltered and immediate information about the events in Iran, and the policy narrative about internet and democratization both reinforce this notion of internet offering access to (the perspective of) “the people.” I see a relation here to the notion of “the street” as defined by Hirschkind in his discussion of the role of blogs and other digital media in Egypt. Hirschkind discusses how in the midst of political repression by state Egyptian forces, social media applications offer unique analogies of “the street,” doing this through the use of new language forms and video styles. This has similarities with Doostdar’s argument about the emergent (speech) genre of blogging (2004), which also analyzes the implications of the use of colloquial as opposed to formal language in (digital) written form, which transgresses the conventions of formal written and is similarly deemed “vulgar.” Doostar²⁰³ mentions his respondents finding this genre a more “authentic” mode of expression, while Hirschkind (2010) argues that blogging in Egypt represents not simply

²⁰³ While both Hirschkind’s and Doostdar’s research focus on blogs in Egypt/Iran highlights the different ways in which blog writing as a genre produces consequences in the national contexts in question, I am concerned more here with the transnational representations of a movement that social media mediate. The implications inside the Iranian context lie outside the scope of this research.

an “authentic voice of the people.” He argues that this style is effective because it distinguishes itself both from an authoritarian government discourse and from the pedagogical styles of persuasion of Islamic political parties through “written colloquial.”

Furthermore, he argues that the blogging genre cultivates and objectifies “the experience of a violated national subject” through a variegated montage of video representations of acts of state repression (Hirschkind, 2010). In the case of social media covering the Iranian protests, a similar sort of montage was collectively created for diaspora audiences among others with the help of social media sites. I discuss this in the final section of this chapter. These sites seem to offer an aesthetic that presents an “authentic” version of social and political dynamics and developments compared to other available mediations of these events (in particular, television news broadcasts). While the blogs of US-based news outlets were important for background and analysis, the video footage, photographs, and evocative Tweets shared via social media (sometime Tweets were shared on Facebook in cross-media sharing) were the source of affective mobilization. Naficy²⁰⁴ calls the digital video production of Iran’s Green Movement an “embodied production mode” that results in the “raw footage of affect.” The aesthetics of this digital corpus, built by varied independent producers, creates the sensation of a “real” connection with a pro-democracy people’s movement as experienced by participants in Iran, including important affective elements of this. It also objectifies the people’s movement in Iran for engaged, distant audiences, including my diaspora respondents.

Social media’s mediation of the movement, therefore, affectively mobilizes transnational sentiments of Iranian-ness through reifying “the Iranian people” through representations scarcely seen in American media – especially as producers²⁰⁵ – thus creating a rupture in style and content from conventional messages. The discourses of internet democracy and

²⁰⁴ Keynote Speech by Dr. Hamid Naficy at Iranian Alliances Across Borders Annual Conference, November 2012.

²⁰⁵ A unique exception to this trend (Asghar Farhadi’s 2012 Academy Award for Best Foreign Film for his film, *A Separation*), and the overwhelmingly positive response among so many my respondents to this even confirms the scarcity I mention, despite Iranian cinema being a general exception in international media representations of and by of Iranians.

digital diplomacy rely for their public resonance with international audiences in part on the construction of such evocative imaginaries of societies in the throes of democratic struggle, a message delivered wrapped in the aesthetics of internet. Rather than being a neutral faculty of internet media, the democratic qualities with which the transnational use of social media applications are imbued in this context of protest rely at least in part on the aesthetic qualities of how social media are experienced as immediate, offering direct access to events on the proverbial ground. In the following I delve into a debate that unfolded among actors in my field location about the ability of internet to – similarly to the discussion around “democracy” and “freedom” – mediate the experience of being present at the place of time of the events in Iran.

Presence through web connections

“Being there” and the rise of the Green Movement

Returning to the panel discussion, the role of the web application, Twitter, during these developments in Iran was central to the discussion that day, especially with the hotly contested term, “Twitter Revolution.” Cohen cautioned that the role of internet media applications like Twitter should not be overstated. His concern was mainly that public debate avoid giving the impression to people that “social media” could be taken to replace conventional journalistic textual forms, and the model of journalistic correspondence from the actual site of the news event. He called attention to what internet media were *not* able to mediate. And his stance on the panel that day was consolidated by a quote he read from his own column in the New York Times, published on July 5th, 2009. He later also used the same quote in a column that was published in the Times on September 9th, 2009, about this event itself. The quote read:

To be a journalist is to bear witness. The rest is no more than ornamentation. To bear witness means being there — and that’s not free. No search engine gives you the

smell of a crime, the tremor in the air, the eyes that smolder, or the cadence of a scream.

The panel that day and the discussions that ensued around it implicitly became a debate among journalists, editors, activists, and bloggers over what the narrative about the role of internet should be regarding the events in Iran. Cohen mentioned an attack on his earlier statements by Arianna Huffington, director of influential and progressive aggregate blog/site, the Huffington Post. In his September 2009 column, Cohen had said that Iranians had, themselves, “borne witness” to the crackdowns on street protesters and other dissents through social media, and that this act required physical presence which had a price, “sometimes even the ultimate price.” Huffington’s statement in response had been: “The truth is, you don’t have to ‘be there’ to bear witness. And you can be there and fail to bear witness.” She had also controversially stated in a speech that the Iranian uprising “would not have happened without Twitter.” The debate seemed to become increasingly polarized between the internet boosters and those emphasizing the role of the people (including journalists) “on the ground.”

At the same panel discussion, Mahasti Afshar gave her account as someone who had been heavily using digital media and social media sites in particular to stay updated on the developments in Iran while based in LA. She contended that the engagement of the diaspora with the events and people in Iran had changed in comparison to before the rise of social media. She mentioned the involvement of many in international information exchange and support and those who had helped internet users inside Iran trying to access internet by offering connections to proxies. Among many I spoke with during this time, including the second generation, there was a sense of sharing a common national fate with those protesting inside Iran. In Afshar’s estimation, this sense of closeness to the events and the people at this time was largely due to the information reaching them via internet and via social media applications in particular. Some second-generation commentators at this time also highlighted the way people (not only Iranians) could help the protesters in Iran. Cyrus, a second-generation Iranian American and tech journalist published an article

in TB on June 17th, entitled: How Geeks (and non-Geeks) Can Help Iranians Online, detailing a list of measures involving internet technologies in various ways (even peripherally tech-related ways, like making donations to internet access projects like Tor).

Despite the sense of proximity some expressed, it was remarkable that for others there was also a strong sense of both physical and mental distance felt. This was a distance many of them expressed the desire to overcome. A few of my second-generation respondents mentioned their parents' comments about wanting to be back in Iran during this time because the stories from the street protests reminded them of experiences of participating in the early days of the Iranian revolution from the 1970s that included massive street protests and a sense of a common goal.²⁰⁶ Some of my respondents who themselves had little to no living memory of the early period of the revolution nevertheless also expressed an unfulfilled desire to "be there" at this historic time. In addition, recent student migrants from Iran I spoke with expressed their sense of distance from their compatriots participating in protests that they, themselves, would certainly have been attending side-by-side with them had they been in Iran. In a conversation I had with Beeta during this period, I asked about whether the connection she felt with people in Iran had strengthened because of the protests and her following them. She said. "No. It only reaffirmed it, but it's not like I felt it deeper, because I [already] felt it *so* deeply before." In this conversation Beeta also brought up her feelings about the killing of Neda Agha Soltan, a young woman whose death during the protests was caught on a mobile device and circulated internationally via internet, turning her posthumously into an iconic figure for the protests. Beeta stated:

I feel really close to that [the event of Neda's death] because I was really stressed, especially since she was young. But there are people here who take it way too far. All these "I Am Neda" posters, and "I Am Neda" bracelets. I'm like, no, you are not Neda. You were sitting in your home, safe, in the US. You're not Neda. Your cousins may

²⁰⁶ Though most of their parents had moved to the US already at the start of the revolution

potentially be Neda, or you may potentially turn into Neda when you go to Iran, but you're not Neda. Stop acting like, *toham enghad shoja-I* [you're as brave]; like you're in the streets. That made me really mad.

Despite her deeply felt connection to those inside Iran, and despite her active following of the events in the country via various internet news and social media networks, the distance of diaspora is nevertheless very real for Beeta. Her use of internet did not make her feel closer to Iran and people there, but reinforced her positioning as someone who stands in solidarity with the movement there rather than being part of it. Moreover, it angers her to see others ignoring the differences between life outside Iran and those who are physically partaking in the protests. For her, a shared Iranian-ness does not overcome the awareness of a lived distance. Beeta went on to say that even if she were present in the street protests, her participation would be different than those for whom this election's outcome effects the freedoms of everyday life. She expresses a sense of being removed not only from the locale of protest, but also the social and political context in which these events take shape and the longer-term circumstances they shape.

Understanding Beeta's account leads me to see the closeness of the diaspora to Iran – that which Afshar and others also described – as having less to do with a sense of proximity and more to do with a sense of collective simultaneity. Levitt and Glick-Schiller have called for the importance of theorizing simultaneity in the lives of transnational migrants and the ways their daily rhythms and activities that correspond to life and practices across borders and space. They acknowledge the processional nature of transnational migrant life, with its ebbs and flows “in response to particular incidents and crises,” also specifically mentioning, for instance, election cycles.

Studying migrant practices longitudinally reveals that in moments of crisis or opportunity, even those who have never identified or participated transnationally, but who are embedded in transnational social fields, may become mobilized into action (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004: 192).

Such a heightened sense of simultaneity strongly characterized the experiences of many of my respondents during this tumultuous period, including members of the second generation who had previously had little involvement. And in fact it took shape with an intensity that was not the case before or after this period. It was perhaps most intense in the lives of those for whom staying up-to-date about the Iranian political scene was a professional preoccupation as well as an emotional one. Golnoush, Editor in Chief of news website Tehran Bureau and one of my respondents, was one of these people. In a report published by NPR on June 29th, Golnoush's experience was described in the following way:

In the past week, Niknejad has barely left her computer. She is completely disconnected from the suburban reality on the other side of her living room window. "It's like a screen to me. It's like maybe a picture on the wall. What's happening here doesn't engage me anymore." Then pointing to her laptop screen, Niknejad says, "to me — that's what's *real* right now."

The investment in following the events via social media sites during the early phases of the post-election chaos was strongly evident from the internet practices of several of my respondents during this time. As Golnoush explains, at some point she started sharing information via social media sites Facebook and Twitter because of the constant updates that she did not have time to process comprehensively (see screenshot below from June 13th, a day after the elections). The below screenshots show TB's page sharing information received from trusted sources inside Iran.²⁰⁷ The evocative reports convey the sense of emergency associated with first-hand updates about beatings and arrests. Another of the images shows a screenshot of someone's Twitter profile who is tweeting from Iran. This was one of the English language Twitter users who my second-generation respondent, Sepideh, was following and who went by the Twitter handle, "mahdi." After posting regular tweets until three o'clock in the morning in Iran, mahdi announces that he is going to sleep and makes an appeal to his followers to "Please keep #IranElection trending topic on top,"

²⁰⁷ It is noteworthy that these reports also include the status of internet connections and access to sites like Facebook, suggesting the significance of these sites in communicating information beyond press controls.

which was something some of my respondents tried to help to do by sharing information coming from the scene of events and using the hashtag, #IranElection as well as related hashtags.

Mahdi's call was indicative of how closely many in the diaspora were following the events, many staying online until late at night and returning online again early in the morning. The English language postings contributed to keeping the Iranian election trending. The reports on Twitter started to significantly slow down in the middle of the night, Tehran time. This sense of following Tehran time enhanced the sense of simultaneity despite the 9 hour time difference from LA. Beeta's status update on Facebook on June 14th (also below) states that she "has an intense headache that pounds harder every time she reads the news" about Iran. This physically embodied sense of empathy that ties my respondents' lives to those of people in Iran reinforces a sense of simultaneity in the heated circumstances.

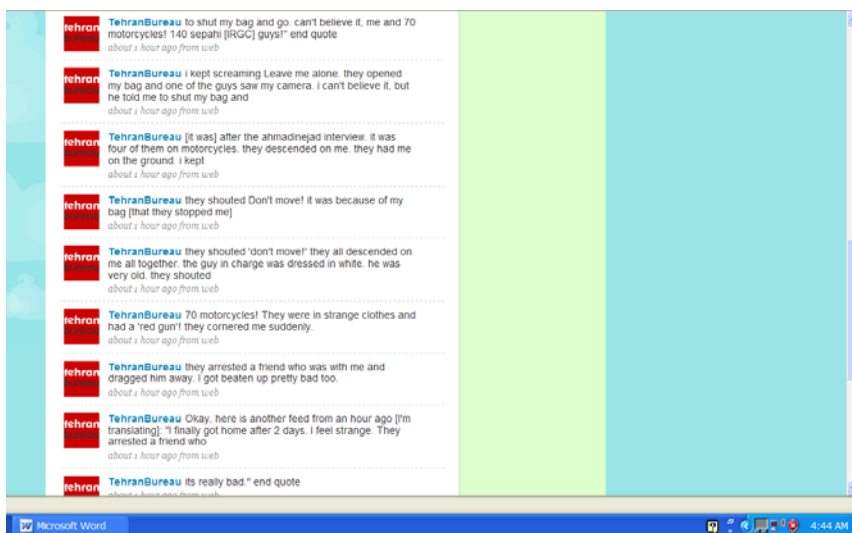


Figure 14 Screenshot from Twitter. Tehran Bureau's account updating minute to minute, June 2009



Figure 15 Tehran Bureau Facebook page from June 2009



Figure 16 Updates on TB Facebook page about circumstances (with police) in parts of the city in Tehran and plans for upcoming protest June 2009



Figure 17 Plea from key Tweeter for other users to keep hashtag #IranElection a trending topic on Twitter, June 2009



Figure 18 Popular Tweeter announcing taking a break for sleep, June 2009

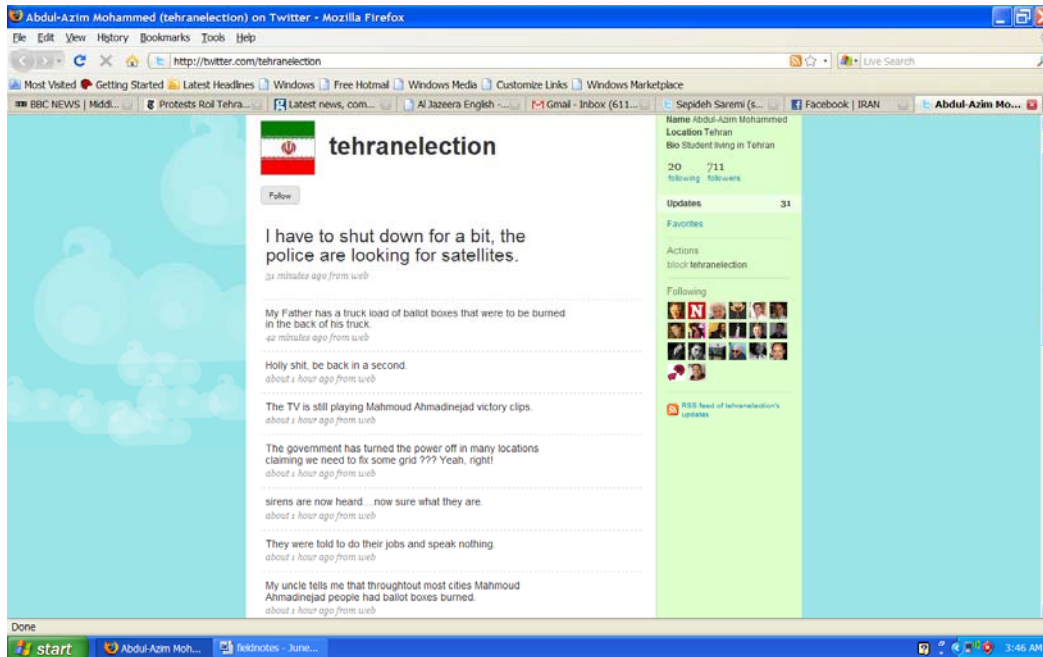


Figure 19 Popular Tweeter announcing going offline to avoid police home satellite dish inspections, June 2009



Figure 20 Beeta's status update on Facebook and response from a friend, June 2009

Additionally, my own experience following the followers of these events online was inevitably also shaped by the intensity of the developments. It seemed this was suddenly so close and such an urgent part of everyday life in LA despite the obvious geographical distance. I found the notion of living in the “headspace” of Iran very pertinent during this time – an expression one of my respondents had once used to speak about being in a place while staying up to date about another via regular internet news. Internet news outlets came to play a central role in forming a “transnational imaginary” that Horst and Panagakos take from Sarah Mahler’s work on transnational telephone use and apply to

internet. As Mahler argues about poor lines of transnational communication, the imaginary is created as much through what is *not* conveyed via media as by what is. In this period a great deal of digital media content was conveyed, and therefore this imaginary came into sharp relief, became urgent, and lived as immersive by a large number of people in the diaspora all at once and together. With attention to what was left out, I noted that some of my respondents were keenly aware of the particular news filters through which they were coming to know information about Iran during this period and what these were omitting.

Pardis was a young woman who came back from Iran to her home in LA during what had been a vacation that had begun before the momentous election. Speaking with me after her return to LA days prior, she mentioned the difference between the news media environment inside Iran versus what she experienced upon return to LA.

I was in Tehran. And I was also in some area of *shomal* (the north) for a while. And then we went to Garmsar which was the total opposite of all the stuff you see on the TV. They were dancing in the streets when Ahmadinejad was elected and even before the election there were so many people, young people of my age, older people, so many people advocating for Ahmadinejad. And the TV and media here doesn't even show that. And if I wasn't in Iran I wouldn't even believe that. And if I didn't go to Iran I would have been one of those people on the streets protesting for us to have foreign intervention and for America to go and help Iran and do this and that. But when you go there and see that these people don't really want a revolution, maybe not yet anyway, you're not going to go stand on the side of the street with those people here because you know that those people there don't really want that yet. If I wouldn't have gone to Iran, I wouldn't have known that. I would have just gone on whatever I see on TV, I wouldn't have really delved deeper to find a better answer, because CNN and all these TV outlets were showing what they showed. And I think a lot of people don't really use their resources to really delve deeper. Only because I went to Iran, during this time, when I came back I have a different outlook on that. Maybe in that way my image changed, because I thought whenever there would arise a chance for a

revolution to come about and kick this regime out, I thought everybody would be united and everybody would want it. even in Iran and outside. I thought everybody would want it. But that's really not the case. It's really not the case.

Justin was another person who actively supported the green movement, but also viewed the mainstream news coverage in the US as reflecting double standards and mainstream American political agendas with regard to the Middle East.

I think media images of Muslims have improved very little since the aftermath of 9-11. Even though coverage of Iranian protesters may seem like an improvement of representation of Muslims, coverage of crackdowns of Iranian protesters has been completely disproportionate with coverage of the recent deaths of Palestinians and victims of US drone attacks in Pakistan to name a few. It seems the media only gives legitimacy to struggles in the Muslim world that oppose US targeted regimes.

In both these cases, the social media and broader internet usage that shaped the experiences of my respondents so strongly during this time was accompanied by their exposure to convention media (state media and corporate news) inside Iran and the US. What I gathered from these instances was how transnational imaginaries were indeed formed through internet. But these were not separate from or seen as more important than the imaginaries formed through my respondents' experiences in their wider (media) environment. There is a sense of emotional closeness that comes with forming a vivid imaginary about Iran through various images and messages, including internet. However, as the responses of some illustrate, these young people also show awareness of the mediation through which their emotional sense of proximity to Iranians inside Iran is fashioned, giving them the idea that the media representations are slightly distorted or colored by the media forms themselves. My respondents feel emotionally invested in the events in Iran, and this brings a sense of immediacy, intimacy, and closeness. But there is also a distance – politically, geographically, and socially – felt by these young diaspora actors between themselves and those in Iran which is greater for them due to being a part of a generation that is aware of their physical but also mental disconnect with that context.

And while there is an intense sentiment of sharing a common fortune with those Iranians across borders, the place where one's everyday life is lived means it still matters profoundly whether one is "there" or not. This duality raises a tension. That is, there is a sense of immediacy and intimacy that connects my respondents to a transnational Iranian nation through their media usage, but there is also a lack of immediacy due to the apparent failures of a technologically mediated telepresence to deliver a substitute for physical presence. I explore this tension further in the following parts of this section, looking closely at narratives about the extent to which web usage overcomes various kinds of distance. I do this by focusing on examples from web journalism productions, which I showed here to be a central source of information about Iran for my respondents at this time. I hope to develop the argument that moments of immediacy rise and fade as my respondents act within this environment during this key period. In these moments people have a sense of "being there" – as though physical presence would be the same. But these moments are fleeting, and doubts quickly set in as the developments become more complicated and audiences diversify their media usage.

Distances and bridges

Tehran Bureau was named the first "Virtual Bureau" on Iran, as it was not located in Tehran itself, but was set up by Golnoush Niknejad based in New York and has individuals writing from inside Iran, sometimes under pseudonyms, sometimes under their real names. A second-generation Iranian American who grew up in the LA area and is a graduate of Columbia University's School of Journalism, Golnoush points out how Tehran Bureau's status of being located outside Iran but operating in part inside the country is new, uncertain, and experimental.

I stay up at night wondering whether what we're doing is legal. We want to be credible and have good connections. Good, so that we should be able to get a quote from people about something important when it happens. The problem is that when I

wanted to get credentials for our correspondent in Iran, they told me that we were not registered anywhere under the jurisdiction of any laws because of the fact that our agency was online. They didn't see us as a legitimate agency because of our online publishing rather than print publishing. But despite this, one of our correspondents says that he wants to go to Iran and write for us even though there may perhaps be problems with *Ershad* [Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance].

What surprises me at times is that sometimes people think certain things are not controversial. There is one woman who often tells me that to her writing about certain things is fine, even when I think it might be problematic. She was writing about certain taboo topics that I thought serious enough to mention to her that it might cause problems for her being in Iran. But she said it was okay and didn't see it as a big deal. Another correspondent wanted to know whether it's dangerous to be doing certain reports, but I have to just tell him that I don't know how dangerous it will be because these things are up in the air right now.

Golnoush's account recognizes the barriers and boundaries of operating transnationally between Iran and the US. It represents much more than a free flow of unedited information directly from "the ground" through "new media" to outside audiences. Rather, it represents a committed engagement with legal and socio-political restrictions on one side of the border, and an engagement with policy frameworks and standards of journalistic credibility on the other. This engagement and its formal ambiguities is what keeps Golnoush up at night as it has consequences for her work and for the correspondents inside Iran who contribute to TB. Her trust relationship with correspondents and her relationship with Iranian government agencies impinges upon her life as an editor and journalist based in the US.

It is also interesting that these strictures shift when she moves, depending on the country where she is located. This was apparent from her statements on the panel, "Production of Diasporic Media: Entertainment & Journalism" at the 2012 annual Conference on Iranian Diaspora organized by IAAB at the UCLA campus in LA. She mentions that, having moved

for a while to Abu Dhabi and Dubai in order to cover the elections, that “the censorship was amazing there,” while trying to cover Iran. “The closer you got to Iran, the harder it was to cover it,” Golnouch said of doing 2009 election coverage. The landscape of controls is therefore an important factor in the journalistic production of someone like Golnouch, despite operating outside Iran. While she is able to publish stories digitally from outside the country with relative freedom from direct government reprisal, the locations she is in and her connections to those physically located inside the country bring their own forms of control and concern. Rather than being immune to state influence because of the “virtual” status of TB, Golnouch and the journalists that work for TB are subjected to the consequences of censorship. As she was quoted as saying in an NPR report written about her and TB and published during the height of events on June 29th, “Oh, I have nightmares every night, and I wake up several times just kind of gasping for air. I hope people are OK.”²⁰⁸

Golnouch’s concerns are hardly unfounded. The consequences for Iranian American journalists working for American publications and making visits to Iran were made clear during this period by the cases of Roxana Saberi, an Iranian American journalist who has been a contributor for NPR, BBC, and other outlets, and who was arrested before the 2009 elections and imprisoned for a duration of approximately five months on charges of espionage (released in the run-up to the elections) before going on hunger strike and garnering a great deal of international support and pressure on the Iranian government²⁰⁹. Maziar Bahari, an Iranian American reporter for Newsweek, was then also detained after the elections during his visit to Iran in 2009. He was held in solitary confinement, tortured, interrogated, and forced to give a false confession before being released after approximately 4 months. He was also held on (multiple) charges of espionage. TB also did coverage of Saberi and Bahari’s detentions and the aftermath thereof as well as by other

²⁰⁸ Smith, Tovia, “Tehran Bureau: Live from Massachusetts”

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=105929814> (accessed 1/12/14).

²⁰⁹ Including from human rights organizations like Amnesty, the US government, various high profile news editors and journalistic organizations.

international press. During this time, the attack on TB was a digital one targeting the website. The site experienced an attack by an unknown source at a time when its reporting was particularly important to international audiences and events were escalating in Iran. This can be attributed to its significant reporting from inside the country and analysis for English speaking news audiences. This was responded to by TB with a call for Ddos attack on regime websites (see below).

The detention of the journalists mentioned and others suggests that their presence is of consequence to the type of coverage events inside Iran receive from the international Western press. Reporters Without Borders stated that as of June 20, the government had arrested at least 24 reporters, and Iran's asking of foreign journalists to leave and restricting visas usually issued to journalists outside the country indicated a wider policy that saw foreign journalism as a direct threat during the aftermath of the election. The fact that these individuals' safety and freedom curbed so that they cease their activities suggests that there is some specific value to physically "being there" and having correspondents in Iran. Therefore, this model apparently offers something that relying on citizen journalism and crowd sourced information does not. Golnouch explains her position with regard to journalistic controls from a distance in the following way.

Whether we live here or in Iran, we're always subjecting ourselves to some kind of censorship. It comes in many forms – we're all familiar with it. And I got tired of us all speaking in code to each other so that we're not rude to this person, or we don't get someone killed back there, or so we can still continue to go back to Iran. So I see my being here and not going back to Iran as actually an advantage and not a disadvantage. And by creating a window onto Iran, in a way we're giving it a frame and a focus that we don't get here. And when you're in Iran, you don't know how the world is seeing you; you don't know in what language to speak to them.

This positioning reflects Golnouch's complex relationship with mobility, information, borders/boundaries, and transnational migration – one that is experienced by other bloggers/journalists in the Iranian diaspora as well. By resigning herself to travel

constraints that prevent her from entering Iran, Golnoush sees not only an advantage with regard to her own safety, but also an advantage in the freedom she has in the content of her work as a journalist covering Iran. In addition, her embedding within the American news landscape and its most high profile institutions brings weight and relevance to the reporting TB does. Her situation is nonetheless a trade-off between her communications and her physical mobility.



Figure 21 From TB Facebook page, June 2009

The privilege of being able to consume information from a distance via internet therefore relies on the work of those who subject themselves to the limitations and sometimes punishments that come with offering others a sense of proximity without physically “being there.” For some, journalistic websites help bridge distances with information access, even as distances and borders exert themselves on the actors that produce these sites. Bakardjieva’s work on internet technologies helps to understand how absences and presence is manipulated with the help of the notion of amplification/reduction (Bakardjieva, 2005). This means that technological mediation involves the reduction of some aspects of the mediated object while amplifying others. For example, as Bakardjieva describes, “the person experienced through the telephone is brought to me across a great distance [amplification] at the expense of being reduced to a voice [reduction]” (2005: 60). In the case of internet in Golnouch’s TB website, like much of the social media usage that the project was integrated with, internet amplifies the reports for audiences outside the country on the events in Iran. Golnouch answers a question about how important web use is to the work she does by saying, “Immensely... we wouldn’t be able to do what we’re doing at all without Internet.” Her work both circumvents political and geographical boundaries/distances while also bringing them into sharp relief;²¹⁰ web applications help information and news stories to cross geo-political borders while the controls they circumvent are exerted upon the correspondents. This is also an illustration of the following quote from migration scholars Basch et al. that highlight the (un)bounded-ness of transnational communications.

Much like transnational migrants, information and communication technologies can be bounded by national laws that govern their usage yet at the same time they also

²¹⁰ This has to do with the physical infrastructure of internet that relies on geographical topography to facilitate the laying of fibre optic cables stretching long, underwater distances. The reason why Iran can keep a stronghold on internet access to the extent that it does is partly possible simply because of the way the physical infrastructure is set up: there are a few entry-points that can be put under pressure. This is in contrast to a country like the US that has many more points of entry, making it more difficult to control access in a centralized way (see *The Net of Elsewhere*).

remain 'unbounded' as they are appropriated to suit a variety of aims (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994 cited in Panagakos & Horst, 2006: 113).

Golnoush's editorial and journalistic work is made possible by particular affordances of her use of a website for news publishing, but come at the price of uncertainty and limited-/im-mobility. The particular affordances that appear through her usage include staying out of reach of attacks by the Iranian authorities in ways that other established news agencies with employed correspondents were not able to do. In the following I discuss further how key figures like Golnoush and their use of web applications at this time bridged distances in certain ways that were unique to the intersection between their positioning and their use of journalistic web publishing and editing.

Transnational cultural translation

As the weeks passed, the protests died down, and the analysis of the events and the back-stage politics within the Islamic Republic came to the fore. The Green Movement seemed to enter a different stage, and as international mainstream broadcast attention shifted to other events. Twitter and Facebook feeds of my respondents quieted down regarding the developments and emphasis moved to analysis, reflection, and the next steps. The following is an excerpt from field research blog I was writing at the time from a piece I posted some months on. It was entitled "Translating a Movement":

A few days ago, blogger Omid Memarian told me a story about the day after the June elections this year. As someone who knows pretty much all the major news agencies' Iran correspondents, he called one of these colleagues (based in the US) and started talking animatedly about his analysis of the events. The journalist on the other end sounded confused. He listened but didn't have much to say. Forty Eight hours passed. It was only then that the journalist friend started to feel he had grasped what had happened after the elections, how, and why, and called Omid back. Omid said his own

lack of time-lag was due to his close embedding in the political context of Iran. He explained that blogs like his own, which provided immediate English language commentary on the events in Iran from a real insider's perspective, fulfilled a unique role in the wake of the election turmoil. They were the translators.

Many young second generation Iranians I've been talking to are aware of this need for translation. And English language blogs and websites are where several of them look to find it. But it happens offline too. Nothing exemplified this for me more than when we rounded up a bunch of friends, first and second generation students, and went to watch Khamenei's fateful post-election speech together in Westwood. The running commentary of the meanings behind the "leader's" words was for the benefit of those second generation kids who were deeply interested – enough to be there that night till 3 in the morning – but would have been lost without translation.

The political actions and stances of these second generation kids show awareness of their own distance from the complexities of the developments in Iran. But this doesn't mean they're passive. Student organizers I spoke with were clear about their support for and solidarity with the demonstrators of the green movement in Iran... It seems the important links between them are sources closely entrenched in both the Iranian and diaspora contexts - the virtual bureaus and journalistic blogs of those first (and some 1.5) generation individuals who have gained status as translators for this movement.²¹¹

The YouTube videos that took hold of the emotions of so many of the onlookers outside Iran were slowly replaced by the more subtle analyses of the political intricacies of the changing situation in Iranian politics and the key/emerging players at the time. The videos of street protests filmed by participants or "citizen journalists" were the initial media

²¹¹ Alinejad, Donya, "Translating a movement," <http://donya-onlocation.blogspot.nl/2009/11/translating-movement.html> (accessed 1/12/14)

products that drew the attention of international press and audiences worldwide and what they showed was generally very dramatic and spectacular images from the scenes of protest and the responding crackdown in Tehran streets – including a great deal of violence against the bodies of protesters and the often surreptitious capturing of this in amateur video recordings. These videos mobilized strong emotions. In part this was due to the immediacy conveyed by the amateur style (often shot from street level within the protests or people’s apartment buildings with their commentary to one another), the often dramatic urgency of the subject matter, and the fact that these visual accounts constituted a sea of footage uploaded and shared via social media applications during this period. This sense of immediacy via the digital audio-visual recordings also came from the lack of need for translation. It seemed to reveal the nature of what was happening with unmistakable clarity. There was a veneration of those who were doing this journalism, and their integration with their mobile, networked electronics devices that were allowing them to do so. One of the most popular political cartoons that circulated on Facebook at this time was the one below:

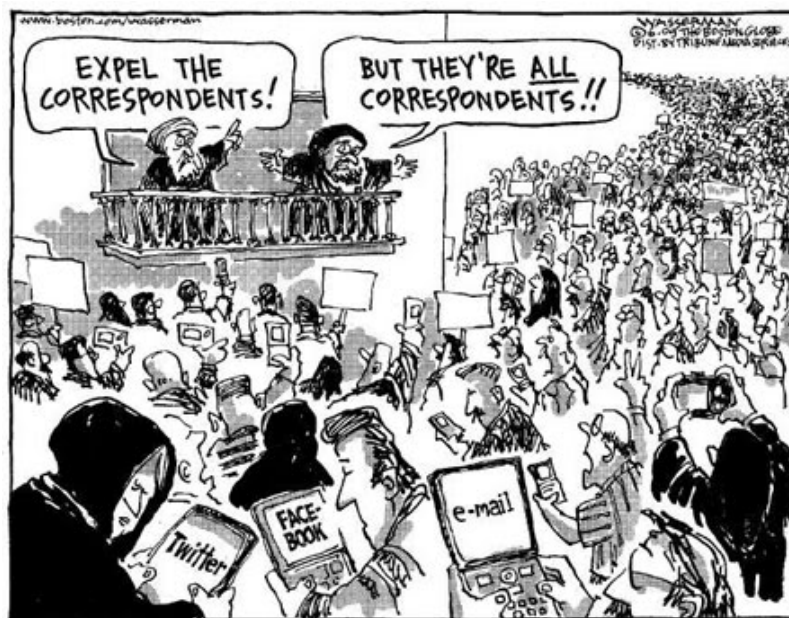


Figure 22 Widely circulated political cartoon highlighting role of social media in the movement, captured in June 2009

This cartoon was also referenced by Mahasti Afshar in her talk on the panel mentioned earlier. She commented at the time that, “the green movement tagline has become ‘you are the media’.” The narrative that people are, themselves, the media in this context was a recurrent element of the mainstream coverage of the events in the press that most of those in LA had access to. This seemed also to contribute to the sense of immediacy around the coverage – the notion that people were acting as conveyers of their own situation. The videos also started to become more diverse in content as the actions did – they included the night actions between the daytime street protest moments.

However, for some, these videos revealed as much as they concealed. Namely, as the protests were increasingly deterred - precisely by this concerted violent crackdown by authorities - less of these protest images were produced and the attention for these videos dropped as less visually-spectacular dynamics such as backroom deals, parliamentary politics, divergences within various government agencies about the developments and other ambiguities became more important for understanding the events. Amitis was skeptical of the kind of news that the video footage of street protests was able to highlight. She said:

Online, when you see stuff it’s decontextualized. And people are drawn to certain images; hyper-exaggerated images, not the mundane; not the day to day. But those [the latter] are the things that are creating change.

This concern by Amitis reflects her awareness of the particular affordances of web applications like YouTube and Twitter (with their focus on the visual and on instantaneity and brevity) and how these may limit the access she and others outside Iran have to the developments. Amitis was not alone in her skepticism of how social media applications were mediating the events. Some of my respondents started commenting that their own and their friends’ Facebook feeds had become “echo-chambers” that lacked much critical analysis, reflection, or accurate and nuanced understanding of what was going on. One

second-generation young woman commented that her university department mailing list, in fact, was a more fruitful space for thinking about the events than Facebook during this period.

Regarding understanding the events and their implications, I found at the time that - as mentioned in the blog post I wrote then - the role of translators quickly became important in the midst of these events. Omid Memarian was one of TB's contributors and an influential political journalist/blogger on Iran living in the diaspora whom I also mentioned in my blog post included above. He elaborated during this period on the importance of interpreting the events in Iran for international audiences, emphasizing the importance of longer-term cultural knowledge both in the US and Iran.

For someone like me who is deeply involved in internal politics it was not hard to understand the politics of society and the result. I wrote something like a manual for the Huffington Post. The next day I called a friend and I wanted a quote and he was shocked to listen to my analysis for what happened. It took 42 hours for him to understand. The Islamic republic has a very strong and influential propaganda machine and the state media is a part of that. It's hard to go beyond the government's narrative. Many foreign journalists, I am friends with most of the people who cover Iran, from The Guardian etc., they [struggle with] how to verify their interpretation of the events. They have to be able to understand, and many of them are in touch with people like me to understand the complexity.

Omid equally stressed the lack of accurate information that Iranians have about life, politics, and the media in the US, saying that "the ones" like himself "who are writing in Farsi and English have a change to bridge both sides." In their own ways and with their own projects heavily relying on aspects of digital journalism, people like Golnoush and Omid are the bridges, the translators, the trusted nodes, and the interpreters for transnational audiences, shaping the conversations on either side of the borders they traverse and straddle in their work. The second generation had been drawn into the developments through happenings that needed no translation. And the engagement with

largely visual media forms, produced from the vantage point of Tehran's street protesters, seemed the perfect way to convey these. However, the sense of immediacy soon faded for many of them.

This became clear during a late night I spent with watching the Iranian Supreme Leader's televised speech with some first and some second-generation young people in a café in Westwood that I also mentioned in my blog posting. Watching the television mounted on the wall on the terrace of the café, members of the second generation quickly realized they required translation, not only linguistic, but contextual and sub-textual translation of the historical and political dynamics in which this hopeful movement took shape. That night, the first generation translators were active vehicles of the message for the others. These translators were not only linguistic interpreters for the second generation, but also cultural decoders.²¹² Translators could also be those inside Iran, family members or trusted contact that would relay developments aurally as in a familiar way instead of in the written form that most internet news articles that much Persian language news coverage took. The importance of trust during this period shaped people's ways of obtaining information from outside the country, both through internet and other means. Mahdis, for instance, posted the following on Facebook on June 15th:

@GESfandiari - People shouting in Tehran now on rooftops "We Don't Want a Midget Dictator" [ostensibly referring to Ahmadinejad] Heard it myself over the phone" (you can't kill our humor).

Others also used social media updates to relay the contact they had via trusted family members in Iran about over the phone. The trust connections with those inside Iran that had already been built were maintained habitually over the telephone in this crisis situation where there was a premium on getting trusted information quickly. This can be

²¹² It was significant that the relationship between the first and second-generation students I had most contact with became both more pronounced during this time, as well as polarized and fraught with disagreement, especially, about the role the US should take. Alongside my observations in this direction, Beeta, one of my respondents also confirmed this at the time.

seen as the workings of what Gershon calls “media ideologies” (2010), which are basically the ideas people have about the media they use that in turn shape how they use it (Gershon, 2011). This means that using the telephone to get reliable information from loved ones or people one knows in this situation rather than via through an avid Twitter user they do not know suggests that the meaning people give to different media at this crucial time also shapes the way they use media and understand the messages conveyed. In a situation when risks and hindrances associated with using internet due to connections being blocked and dissidents suffering repression encouraged, those I spoke with turned to the phone at times as an imperfect but more trusted alternative – which for some yielded information that was then shared via social media with their contacts. This same combination of phone and social media usage showed that social media (and not phones) was apparently the most effective way to spread the information gained among one’s network outside the country.

Twitspam also set up a Web page titled “Fake Iran election Tweeters” during this period. The page listed “possible fakes accounts and may have connections to the Iranian Security apparatus.” The site added:

This post will be updated as fake accounts are received. For those questioning the information here, we place accounts here that a) post multiple comments of the same sort (i.e., spam) and b) accounts that are obviously trying to entrap Twitter users who are tweeting from Iran or c) those who obviously are trying to spread misinformation. If we aren’t 100% sure we will put in it the ‘Suspected’ list.

In addition to the ostensibly fake accounts, lists of the Twitter handles of a number of apparently trustworthy users inside Iran were circulated. These were passed along by those who had no knowledge of the posts of Twitter users inside Iran before this time, including some of my respondents who had not used Twitter before the election turmoil. These lists of Twitter users were also shared on Facebook given that many had different (larger) networks on Facebook than Twitter (especially new users). The image below shows part of one of these lists as shared on Facebook. This was one of the ways in which

people developed new media literacies through the circulating of knowledge about (un)trustworthy sources. In this instance, the question of who to trust and what to base that on was central to the internet/social media practices of my respondents. In the following section I bring together some of the main points of this section in an attempt to show how the narrative/debate around the possibilities of presence/proximity to the events and people in Iran through internet media was refracted through counter-narratives about and usage of internet by my respondents.



Figure 23 Facebook users posting popular and trusted Twitter accounts for others to follow, June 2009

This has implications for the development of web applications specifically meant for Iranians to use. The foremost and rather unique example of this is Balatarin.com. This site was evidently highly useful in Iran during the Iranian post-election period but also beyond that period. Balatarin was created by Mehdi Yahyanejad before the 2009 election. Mehdi is an Iranian American living in LA and working at the USC School of Engineering. As Balatarin's example of international solidarity shows, a successful technical application facilitated by actors outside Iran relies on knowledge of the particular needs of people inside Iran (in this case, a news aggregator with a rating system). Furthermore, Mehdi

points to how the uses that people put applications to can be instructive for those on the programming side. Mehdi gave a talk on the USC campus to an auditorium of mostly Iranian American graduate students in 2009, in which he referred to his interest in increasingly “localizing” the possibilities of internet technology. Just as Balatarin was a site directed specifically to Iranians, Mehdi was interested in developing programs that facilitated the even further localized consumption of news. Noting that people blog about issues that are relevant to their immediate environment, he was interested in developing ways to organize this information on the basis of the user’s location through a web-based, mobile application.

To illustrate the value of this, he used an example he had heard about in the context of the Iran protests. He described the case of a protester who wrote an account of being attacked with police violence during a peaceful protest. The post was placed on Balatarin and became popular. Following this, the discussion thread under the post was joined by the police officer who had committed the violence described in the post. (amazing, what did he say?) The discussion that ensued gained extreme popularity and heated attention by users. Mehdi used this example to illustrate how the particular investment in local events drew people to want to use internet applications along those same local lines, especially under such contested circumstances as were underway in Iran at the time. The local, national, and linguistic barriers to use of Balatarin were further demonstrated by the clear disconnect between the original site and its English version. After its immense success in Iran, the Balatarin team and volunteers began to translate content to English and set up an English version of the site. However, this did not do nearly as well, failing to garner but a small fraction of the usage of the Farsi language original and posting a small proportion of the amount of content.

My second-generation respondents shared the Balatarin site on social media, and they knew of and heard about its success. But most were not users of the site because of the language barrier and, as some told me during the time that their speed of reading in Persian was too slow for their passionate interest in the reports from the events, events

they otherwise heard about almost as they happened, demanding a fast-paced, real-time mode of staying up to date with changing information, such as established English language news sources that were regularly updated via “liveblogging” stints. This can be taken to illustrate the limits of what linguistic translation can do to bridge divides of transnational digital communication, as the focus on locational technologies in the design of new applications reflects the sustained relevance of locally-oriented internet communication. The example of Mehdi, Balatarin, and the mostly diaspora users of the site on the surface present a successful practical model for how the “people-to-people diplomacy” idea is assumed to work with the help of internet. However, this instance also reveals the importance of Balatarin’s embedding in the news landscape in Iran during this important time, thanks to its popular user base built beforehand. Furthermore, it also reveals socio-linguistic boundaries and how these are reflected in technical issues.

The assumptions behind the US’ people-to-people approaches to state diplomacy therefore neutralize the meaning of “internet freedom” by reducing it to a technological principle and in so doing depoliticize internet control. This is how the directive of “internet freedom” for Iran comes to operate as an apparently exceptional mode of US diplomacy, dissociated from the otherwise often-hostile policy stances. It serves the narrative that internet represents an essentially an unmediated form of communication between people in the West and those living under repressive regimes. This obscures the accepted understanding among internet researchers that internet is subject to power structures like any communications media and its built infrastructure is (Flew, 2008). While Hilary Clinton has acknowledged that internet is a “tool” that can be used towards positive or detrimental ends in society and has no necessary effect on democratic freedoms, there is still a strong assumption in policy and discourse that freedom of information relies on “internet freedom.”²¹³ Bridging the digital divide and notions of internet freedom are often

²¹³ In the case of the US’ 21st Century Statecraft, this issue came under particular scrutiny around the US State Department’s harsh reaction to the Wikileaks operations of leaking secret government documents. There was also a good deal of attention around this time for the hacktivist network, The Pirates Bay, and the work they were doing toward helping people in Iran to secure access to internet. This was a dispersed group that some

internationally seen and publicly presented as a neutral agenda. Yet adapting Franklin's statements on digital divides: closing the divide cannot be done in a politically universalistic way as it is not simply a technical and representational divide. What constitutes it is also sociocultural and political economic.

Nevertheless, narratives of people-to-people diplomacy through digital media enjoy wide public appeal, and so government diplomacy and citizen solidarity appear to merge to some extent under 21st Century Statecraft,²¹⁴ However, I showed how the influential Iranian American organizations like NIAC respond to the "virtual" diplomacy by pointing out that it cannot replace real and genuine diplomacy, and orient their lobbying actions accordingly. As the sanctions have been tightened until 2013, there have been increasing calls from high profile Iranian Americans bolstering the official advocacy to stop the sanctions on Iran (in particular on essential medicines) on both political and humanitarian grounds. This has included web-based campaigning around this issue; an activity that has engaged some of my respondents and their social media usage as well.²¹⁵ Here I have discussed the contradictions between the US foreign policy narrative of bringing web access to Iran as a means to fostering democracy and the complex socio-technical nature of barriers to transnational web connections.

The mediation of presence

The period of the Green uprising was generally marked by questions of physical distance/proximity between those inside Iran and those in the diaspora. Could those

of my first-generation engineering graduate student contacts in LA also worked with during this period. While the attention for their targeting of the Iranian government at the time was largely positive, Pirate's Bay is also an entity that has come under repeated public and official scrutiny for using similar strategies against other targets.

²¹⁴ This is also despite the possible negative ramifications that people-to-people diplomacy may have on diplomatic negotiations and relations between governments, as governments appealing to citizens of another country directly historically (in the case of the US and Iran in particular) precludes diplomatic exchange between Heads of State.

²¹⁵ This phenomenon's notable rise is more recent than my fieldwork

outside the country understand what was going on inside and to what extent? How could the barriers imposed by the government controls and the distance of geography be overcome without physical travel? How to get trustworthy information? Internet became deeply intertwined in these questions as narratives emerged that suggested that internet communications could circumvent or defy borders and distances. These narratives related to the question of presence and whether or not presence could be mediated. In this section, I discussed some examples of how respondents talked about their own sense of presence/absence with relation to the elections and uprising in Iran, and how their web uses played a part in their experiences.²¹⁶ Saskia Sassen states the following in her discussion of digital/non-digital assemblages:

Hypermobility and “dematerialization” are usually seen as mere functions, or capabilities, of the new technologies. This understanding ignores the fact that it takes multiple material conditions to achieve this outcome. Once we recognize that hypermobility had to be *produced* (emphasis original)... we introduce nondigital variables in our analysis of the digital (Sassen, 2006: 344).

This statement calls attention to what makes the “hypermobility” of media messages possible. In this case I argue it is the producers (and translators, as I have called them) that act as mediating bridges, and the material conditions they operate in. Sassen’s analysis is further relevant to the mediation of presence because it acknowledges the filtered partiality of this mediation. She writes:

Representing such an object as hypermobile is, then, a partial representation since it includes only some of the components of that object, that is, those that can be digitized at a given time. Much of what is liquefied and circulates in digital networks

²¹⁶ This discussion of “being there” also relates to discussions of internet’s abilities to offer realism. Manovich’s 1995 essay on digital photography discusses the question of the realism of mediation with increasingly advanced technologies, addressing the question as one about aesthetics. He doubts that there will come a level in technological advancement at which the level of realism in digital representations satisfies criteria of actual presence <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/lev-manovich/articles/paradoxes-of-digital-photography/> Manovich, Lev, “Paradoxes of digital photography,” (accessed 1/12/14)

and is marked by hypermobility is only one component of a larger entity that remains physical in some of its components (Sassen, 2006: 345).

Her remarks recognize that the object of mediation is not made redundant because it is digitally mediated. Rather it retains its “distinct irreducible character.” In other words, social media mediates the events in a way that seems to capture only certain parts of the experience of physical presence, as others are omitted. As I have discussed with regard to my respondents’ ideas about “being there,” people tend to be aware of the partiality of the media messages they engage with through social media, and negotiate which content they trust through emergent media literacies.

The election dispute, the house arrest of the main opposition candidates, the reshuffling of power among key and peripheral political figures, and President Obama’s response were all moments and developments that shaped the direction and progression of events around this period, and tended not to be the subject of live-Tweeting and flickr.com posts, but rather the measured political journalism by bloggers, correspondents, and analysts. The functions of Twitter and Facebook shifted from retweeting evocative statements from those involved in the protests to sharing links to analysis pieces. However, during events like the statement of the Supreme Leader and the mass funeral processions for the victims of the violent crackdown there were upsurges in the sharing of videos, photos, and live-Tweeted messages again. These oscillations in media usage reflect the “sociobiographical situation and immediate situation at hand” as Bakardjieva puts it (2005: 66). As this situation changed, people traded in one form of media amplification for another in accordance with the nature of the events, and the ways they could be best conveyed to audiences through the digital means at hand. It is within this changing situation that people developed new social media literacies. These were shaped and limited by their own previous experience with certain social media applications, and by pre-existing trust-based social relationships.

While many of my respondents saw the developments in Iran as a time to connect with being Iranian through a political identity, this did not equate to a sense of (tele-)presence

as part of the events through web applications. This was evident in the language denoting those “inside” and “outside” Iran. When TB’s Farsi speaking audiences inside Iran comment in Farsi on English language articles posted on their Facebook page; when protesters carry English language sign boards in the street demonstration; when a Twitter user inside Iran thanks those outside for helping maintain access to internet through proxies (see below screenshot taken on June 22nd), it shows how cognizant these actors inside Iran are of the fact that international audiences are watching and supporting them from a (digitally mediated) distance, which has the potential of shaping the movement itself.



Figure 24 Acknowledgement of Twitter users outside Iran by a popular live Tweeter, June 2009

My respondents use various web applications to connect with the events in Iran, alongside other media. While there are narratives circulating that social media allow for presence of distant actors or witnesses in Iran, my respondents point to limitations to what these particular applications can mediate. These limits depend on preexisting trust and intimacy, as well as the familiarity with the media form (e.g. television, telephone, or social media) or application (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, group email list) being used. Nevertheless, the use of social media in this context seems to bring my respondents closer to the events in Iran, as well as bringing them a sense of greater understanding about the events, for instance,

through online discussions and social media sharing practices. I discuss this further in the following with regard to particular applications.

Social media use and deep meaning

Facebook feeds

As mentioned in above examples, political and humanitarian issues concerning the situation in Iran at this time became an important strain in many of my respondents' Facebook profile pages and news feeds. For many, it became a serious and urgent news space, which was a change from the dominant apolitical and casual social media fare that characterized their experience during this period. For Beeta, this changed her Facebook experience to the extent that it was difficult for her to go back to the way she had used Facebook before. As the events in Iran subsided and her use of Facebook began to go back to normal, she considered deleting her account as the platform seemed too shallow to her. For her and many others, Facebook had temporarily changed from a frivolous space for everyday socializing to a serious one. But soon the effects of that change dissipated and Beeta was not the only one who began to reflect on her use of Facebook after this period. Because there was no clear cutoff point, however, the effects carried on in different ways after the height of the events in Iran. Hakha talks about the extent to which his Facebook usage became more politicized in general because of the influence of the Iranian uprising. Some months after the elections, this is how he responded to one of my questions about his Facebook feed having become more politicized in general.

No. Well... at some level, yes. Because American politics has been really vibrant in the last year because of the presidential election and Obama and these things going on. But not anywhere the same intensity [as the Iran coverage on Facebook]... Every single video is so dramatic - you can just go to my Facebook page - it's up and down. Since then things have calmed down at some level. But they're punctuated by spikes

on certain days. I still look everywhere for things that are useful and repetitive and actually show what's going on back home. Just because people aren't in the street it doesn't mean things aren't happening within the clerical leadership or the maneuvers by the government. So those are things I still share in case there's anyone in my Facebook community who's interested. So I actually get comments.

The American presidential election the previous year, and the sporadic upsurges in street protests in Iran since were cause for Hakha's Facebook feed to oscillate between issues of political urgency/importance to him and matters that fit in more smoothly with the majority of his friends' more innocuous posts. Hakha also mentioned how active he still remains, telling me he that he collects things from Twitter and different websites and posting links to this content "so that it becomes viral, and also for it to be resonant," at least among his over one thousand Facebook friends. He also mentioned how his Facebook feed merged with other (social media) platforms and outlets for news in this time. He talked about the peak of the events and his engagement with news:

Blogs also. I was feeding for anything. Just through Google news and Google blogs you can go a lot of places. Through Iran News Digest. Some of the Facebook pages of people – political people. The comments on news articles. The comments refer you to another place. I just kept following it. Takes you all over. I spent a lot of time doing that.

Hakha's and others' experiences around their use of Facebook during this time reflected the integration of their Facebook into other digital news consumption and vice versa. His comments and practices signal the emerging significance of the role of intermediary sites that do roundups, selections, and sharing of content from other sites, referring to them as "all the kinds of websites that have sprung up where they collect news articles." He followed this with: "and YouTube of course. I use that to pass the news back and forth." Not only blogs but other social media sites are an integrated part of the news consumption process, with the added aspect of production through the dissemination of sharing. This production is something Hakha invests in when writing status updates (either to go along

with the external content he links to or just as a post) on Facebook. He notes the implications of that when he sees his Facebook friends passing along the short texts he has written. He appreciates that people are listening and spreading the word. These kinds of reactions seem to keep Hakha invested in the task of informing others about what is going on in Iran, and taking Facebook seriously as a meaningful space through which to do that. His observations are part of why he keeps expressing himself emotionally and politically through Facebook about this issue.

This deeper investment contrasts with the relative lightheartedness that many of my respondents associated with Facebook both before and after this time, as evident from Beeta's position above. However, implicitly and explicitly, these people acknowledged that the frivolous basis for having accrued social media contacts or "friends" over time was the reason why Facebook played such a significant role for them during this period as well. The latter was perhaps demonstrated most clearly in Beeta's attempts to use Twitter during the height of the "Twitter Revolution." Namely, she told me about her attempts to start using Twitter once having heard a lot about its importance for Iranians on the news. She started an account and started "following" the main Twitter handles reported via blogs and other sources circulating at the time. However, she soon neglected the account, saying its use felt strange and unfamiliar to her, especially since she had no connections (followers/follows of others) prior to the attention for Twitter in the context of the events of Iran.²¹⁷

Social media were used feverishly by most of those I spoke to during this period, and many like Hakha and Beeta were part of a wider, interactive audience that was moved by what they were seeing and hearing coming out of and about Iran. However, some also expressed feeling something lacking in their use of Facebook around the protests. Facebook was also a space that came to be seen as an echo chamber by some, because of the strong circulation of many of the same videos and articles, accompanied by similar personal commentary.

²¹⁷ Nevertheless, seeing Beeta again in 2012, I noted that she had since become an avid user of Twitter, live tweeting the IAAB conference we both attended in November of that year. Her comfort and fluency with Twitter at that time was a stark contrast with the awkward and uncomfortable start she has talked to me about two years earlier.

Some came to find the space of Facebook news feeds limited in the views and depth of analysis available. As is visible in the following interaction between three female friends, Facebook was used to talk raise the issue of the kind of coverage and views were being circulated on Facebook.



Figure 25 Facebook conversation among my respondents during post-election turmoil in June 2009

Hakha's comment about this function of Facebook seemed to confirm the impression of Facebook as something of a one-way medium in the way he used it.

I have a point of view. In general the articles or blogs I would post are the ones I thought were right on. They reflected my own internal opinions. I wasn't engaging in: hey you guys, what do you think of this idea? I don't do that. I'm a propagandist.

Hakha's embrace of this aspect of Facebook in his usage at the time meant that the meaning he gave the broadcasting aspect of Facebook more eminence than the aspects facilitating in-depth discussion. Nasrin's impression of Facebook as lacking the depth of nuanced discussion led her to look to other (web-based) forums for discussion. There seemed, therefore to be a desire among my second-generation respondents to find in Facebook a meaningful space to share and develop one's experience of the events in Iran from a distance. However, there also seems to be clear admission that this space is not normally made for creating such an experience. In addition, Pouya cautioned overlooking the

significance of the mobilizations by the government in the months after the protests, as he observed that there were still so many people – perhaps a majority of the population – that were not only supporters of the Islamic Regime but of Ahmadinejad. He shared videos of these mass street gatherings in support of the Islamic establishment on his Facebook page as a way to draw attention to what was left out of the coverage of the post-election movement by the Western media and the “citizen journalists” whose videos went viral on social media. In one way or another, these three people engage with the notion that Facebook to some extent lacks the capacity/is not meant to mediate the depths of this issue.

Miller’s discussion of Facebook draws attention to the tendency to think that “Facebook represents a new mode of superficiality, or ‘shallows’” because of its “relentless fixation with the present” (Miller, 2011). While Miller discusses the necessity to take seriously even (perhaps especially) the mundane uses and meanings around Facebook, these examples suggest that the sensational and the mundane uses of Facebook rely on one another. The building of social networks through mundane sociality bolsters the efficacy of individual political broadcasting in a crisis situation. It also appears here that the familiarity with Facebook as a space for social trivialness shapes how people engage with it as a platform for news and discussion during an exceptional period of time about a serious and urgent topic. The mundane and the exceptional are tied together in how people make Facebook more than a shallow space.

It is not only the content of the discussions and the format of discussion on social media sites that shapes these ideas about shallowness or depth. It is also the simple fact that they are mediated by internet. Indeed, questions about “the shallows” of social media overlap with longer-running debates about “virtual communities” and what kinds of interpersonal connections they create (see Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). However, it must be acknowledged that while some expressed disappointment in the shallowness of the discussions and content shared on Facebook at certain moments during their engagements with the developments in Iran, Nasrin’s comments above suggest that more meaningful

discussion is also found through other digitally mediated spaces such as an academic department mailing list. Furthermore, during this time, many of my respondents started coming together more often as well in face-to-face gatherings. There, the information they had exchanged or gained from social media and other internet sites would then be shared and talked about in person. This was especially a time when first and second-generation peers inhabited the same spaces and events, interacting about common interest in the fate of those in Iran. In this way, my second-generation respondents showed signs of building on the information they obtained through social media and their network of Facebook friends, whether through raising this in digitally-mediated or face-to-face spaces. Here I have tried to show how Facebook is used and understood as both a frivolous medium as well as a platform that can mediate deep connections with others. In the following I further discuss typical uses of social media more generally around this period of the 2009 elections in Iran. I analyze how deeply meaningful ways of being Iranian American in solidarity with the protesters in Iran are developed, and in particular how these draw from practices based in (sometimes humorously intended) genres of remixing web-based content.

YouTube Remixes

Watching the many YouTube videos from the Iran events, I noticed that as the original protest footage circulated online it quickly became adapted, built-upon, and developed into what can be called a genre of its own. Interactive multimedia audio-visual montages of a popular protest movement were circulated to a wide audience while these events were still in the process of unfolding. In these productions, protest footage that was combined with a soundtrack, and sometimes with photographic stills. These mash-up video products seemed designed to not only mobilize networks of emotional empathy, but the process of their production itself allowed many people to express their emotional reactions while adding value through their creative alterations. Practices of video adaptation were evident even the simplest act of adding a personal subscript to the footage shared on a “social

media” platform by taking up Facebook’s standard invitation (at the time) to “say something about this link.”

I see these video montages as part of a broader remix culture that entered the practices of many Youtube users since the site’s inception. Namely, the creation of remixed materials from previous Youtube videos to create tributes or parodies with their own spin and post them to the same site is a result of this familiar practice being ingrained within the interactive practices that users engaged in through this “social networking site” via videos. In the case of videos of the Iranian uprising, videos that are repeatedly used in these practices of montage and collage appear to be ones that have the greatest impact on viewers, are taken on by mainstream media channels, and in the process “go viral.” These were the same types of videos from which Beeta had learned the lyrics to *Yaare Dabestani*,²¹⁸ the unofficial anthem of the movement that was sang at gatherings in LA as well around this time.

The video of the young woman, Neda Agha Soltan, who was shot and killed on a Tehran street at the site near to a protest gathering was perhaps the most exemplary instance of this phenomenon of a web video “going viral” and being subject to remixes in the process. However, these collages were not only created with web video facilities. They were also present in the images people printed and displayed on placards at demonstrations. One such placard placed Neda her in a printed collage of other protest scenes of violence against young, unarmed protesters and photographs of beaten, bruised bodies. This was evidently intended to invoke the solidarity of LA protesters with the green movement’s fallen and battered victims. The image of Neda’s bloodied, lifeless face was taken up by countless news media outlets. LA-based and other Iranian musicians and artists wrote and produced songs in her honor as well as in solidarity with the movement. The role of this particular “viral video” was highly significant in the cycle of media production that included a vast array of professional and non-professional media producers.

²¹⁸ I discussed this in a previous chapter.

This was not the first time I had seen a video circulate with popularity among my respondents. The differences and similarities with another video that several of my respondents had either shown me, or referred to in passing, or otherwise spoken about, came to mind. This was the simple video of a first generation, middle aged Iranian American man and Marriott Hotel employee sincerely singing a self-composed song called “I love you, America” in English with a strong Persian accent and a melody that sounded recognizably traditionally Iranian, for the camera of the amateur home-movie maker. The stark contrasts with the video of Neda were clear with regard to content, the place it was taken, the context in which it had become popular, the scale of the popularity, and the general message. However, the commonality was that collages and montages, the remixed versions of both these videos emerged on YouTube after their original posting. Instead of the tributes and homages paid to the video depicting a young woman’s death, the musical performance of a disarming character drew comedic parodies, similarly made by those who had seen the original and were referencing it in various ways. This practice of sampling, remixing, or otherwise referencing an already-popular original product signified participation in a much broader practice associated with YouTube videos. While YouTube has a comment section in which people can express their thoughts about a video on the site textually, there is also a common tendency to express commentary on other YouTube videos through the practice of producing and uploading a new video.

This form of interactive, consumption-/production-oriented commentary on popular videos was not limited to only those who uploaded a spin-off video (a small number of people relatively speaking), but also other cultural and media references to the original. As such, I saw it leading to quite some engagement by some of my respondents. In the case of the unassumingly humorous video of the singing man, so many of the second-generation individuals I spoke with had seen the video that it had become the premise of jokes and impersonations among friends (sometimes with friends’ name being exchanged for “America”). The singer was also declared “Iranian of the day” on popular hub, Iranian.com, with the video posted on the homepage. A second-generation friend to whom I showed the video said it was all about the genuineness of the singer - the fact that he represents his

own, very particular, and very candid way of being both Iranian and American at the same. In her view, the way the second generation engaged with the video was particular, as they might find it funny because of the strong Iranian accent that would be the source of some ridicule among those born and raised in the US. But she also thought they would consider it endearing, because the character of the man was so familiar as to be imagined as one of their older, first-generation relatives. For this reason, she was annoyed at some of the spinoff, parody videos that purely made fun of the original. She also acknowledged that this was just another facet of what internet media brought: remixes that one did not appreciate and could not relate to.

This practice of remixing evokes what has been called the “DJ” in the context of producing content on the web. Arguing for digital media’s capacity to make users into DJs, media theorist Lev Manovich emphasizes the importance of the collage-/montage-making role of digital media.²¹⁹ In this perspective, the potential of remixing of elements of media in a new way is what creates an “aesthetics of new media,” based on riffing and spinning existing content. Indeed, from what I observed, such remixing and/or aggregating of digital content through the process of partial digital reproduction was an important part of how social media applications were used to communicate (about) the events in Iran at this time from the diaspora vantage point. New genres of digital production build on older, familiar practices of making collages of printed images and watching musical montages in films. Furthermore, digital images and sound transferred to other settings and forms of communications (e.g. as printed photographs on protest placards). Hence, a fluid transition emerges between the digital audio-visual content in a raw video of the events in Iran that goes viral, to a musical montage using elements of that and other footage, to other media forms such as printed photos displayed in a politically and emotionally charged use of public space in LA. This range of digital and non-digital media forms is used to communicate not only what is going on in Iran, but also how it should be received by

²¹⁹ Manovich, Lev, “Post-Media Aesthetics,” <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/post-media-aesthetics> (accessed 1/12/14).

audiences in LA; the music, the chants, and the repetition of the same/similar content together indicate to audiences that they should feel moved about this event.

In the case of Neda's death the circulating images contributed to making her an iconic figure and widely recognizable reference point for the issue. The important role of social media in the formation of shared reference points around Iranian-ness was not limited to the events of mid-2009. In fact, the use of digital media also produced modes of being Iranian American for my respondents, precisely through the circulation of messages that made reference to common knowledge or experiences regarding being Iranian. In the case of the Neda images, this visual reference point was a broadly framed one, mobilizing an international sentiment of outrage through the personification of a peaceful yet oppressed movement and generation of youth in Iran. Outside the context of these dramatic events, my respondents used social media to invoke common reference points for being Iranian that mobilized very different emotions among differently-defined audiences of Iranians. However, the mechanism of using social media to create common reference points around which Iranian American-ness was situationally defined by my respondents was similar to the dramatic case of Neda's filmed death. In the following, I discuss the development of such points of reference in ways specific to the use of particular social media applications by my respondents in certain cases.

Tags and memes

At the height of the Iran protests and beyond, Twitter was considered by a great deal of the Western journalistic coverage as "the medium of the movement."²²⁰ However, as some observers noticed at the time as well, this likely had more to do with Western audiences that collected information about Iran from Twitter than about the organization of the movement itself. The use of Twitter was already deeply embedded into the standard

²²⁰ Grossman, Lev, "Iran Protests: Twitter, the medium of the movement."
<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html> (accessed 1/12/14)

practices of journalists in the US; unlike Facebook, Twitter users by design broadcast their content to the public (in the sense that anyone with an account can access and follow Tweets rather than only “friends” confirmed by the user being able to see and follow updates). The role of the hashtag, #Iranelections, in coverage of the event was significant because it was the in the top 5 trending tags on Twitter for many days. This hashtag, along with a few others, were the channels through which many people in my field site, including journalists, followed the story. On news programs, screenshots of Twitter pages and Tweets were broadcast on television to prime-time TV audiences. And news articles referenced certain Twitter users tweeting from Iran as well.

The process that took place was one in which relatively few users from Iran tweeted messages from their locations, while those outside the country with relatively greater access to Twitter and internet technologies helped bring the story to the attention of broader audiences through retweeting/reposting. It is not easy to isolate the role of the diaspora in this process. And indeed, this was a time when discussions arose among my respondents both via social media and elsewhere, about what the role of diaspora – themselves – could/should be in this situation. It was clear that some of my respondents saw it as their responsibility to keep international attention on the events in Iran, conceiving of international audiences as a potential deterrent for the Iranian government’s further brutalization of protesters. Some of my respondents explicitly called for this goal; it was made explicit also in the example in the introduction where Mahdis calls for keeping the Iran election hashtag trending by combining it with the news of Michael Jackson’s death when the latter news event introduced a turnaround in the top trending of the Iranian election protests.²²¹ This practice reflected fluency with the logic behind Twitter. It suggests support for Wasik’s claim (pertaining to virals) that:

²²¹ The Michael Jackson “tag” was not limited to Twitter but also pervaded Facebook as a “meme”. Taken from the Facebook Memology blog entry that covered the Top Status Trends of 2009 under the heading “celebrity deaths”: “No celebrity death had as immediate of an impact on status updates as Michael Jackson’s. Mentions of his name were 10,000 times higher on June 25, the day he died, than the previous day, and no other unexpected news event can compare to the burst we saw on that day. Despite the huge impact of this story,

If there is one attribute of today's consumers, whether of products or of media, that differentiates them from their forebears of even twenty years ago, it is this: they acutely aware of how *media narratives themselves* operate, and of how their own behavior fits into these narratives, that their awareness feeds back almost immediately into their consumption itself (emphasis original) (Wasik, 2009: 3).

It was also an illustration of how an attempt was made by some to use this logic towards the goal of helping Iran. It was interesting that Mahdis' cross-platform practice used Facebook sharing among her "friends" as a means of promoting a hashtag on Twitter, thus seeking to use her strong Facebook connectivity to bolster a Twitter-based action. Rather than seeing this as part of a linear shift towards a certain media logic - as mediatization approaches would have it - this can be understood as people's usage being shaped by the norms of usage inscribed into the platform itself, but at the same time a slight distortion of the inscribed usage by acknowledging the intended use and looking for a way to work it into the pressing purpose at hand.²²² This is how van Dijck has argued social media platforms like Facebook shape usage while also leaving room for users to twist around the inscribed usages (van Dijck, 2013).

This practice reveals that someone like Mahdis - who actively posted in an effort to try to keep #Iranelections trending and called upon others to do the same - can use a hashtag to mobilize a collectivity to contribute to the shared goal of keeping the tag trending. It also reflects the propensity of the content of a hashtag like #Iranelections to being molded and developed by users external to the events in Iran, although evidently deeply invested in those events. It can be said that the diaspora and international audiences took over the Iran election hashtag, shaping its accumulative content through their own Twitter practices. For my respondents, social media sharing was one of very few ways of coming to feel

mentions of his name lasted only about a week, with a resurgence during his memorial 12 days later." Posted December 21, 2009 <https://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook/facebook-memology-top-status-trends-of-2009/215076352130> (accessed 1/12/14).

²²² See also work on tagging and "folksonomies" by Geismar that highlights the interactive, user-oriented, and participative notions around tagging practices within the context of the public's engagement with museum collections (Geismar, 2013)

connection to Iran as well as expressing support for the movement. This intention of awareness-raising/informing was the driving force behind some of my respondents' social media practices. Some of them came to be seen among their non-Iranian friends as authorities on the issue, or at least nodes for the latest information. And by seeing friends share the same videos, and doing the same themselves, social media sharing practices incorporated the repetition, awareness of commonality, and emotional investment. I would argue that this ushered in a sense of togetherness between my respondents who were connected with one another via social media like Facebook and Twitter, but also between them and the many others they did not know who were participating in very similar sharing practices for the same issue.

Through the use of these social media applications, some of my respondents became active producers of content through simple acts of sharing and posting. According to Green's reading of Miller's theory of consumption (2010), these practices are part of how subjects create themselves. Instead of mass goods being consumed to create the self, the spreading of Twitter messages reflects how use of social media creates the self through production. Using this perspective to understand how hashtags were used to manipulate the media attention this issue received on Twitter and beyond, I would argue that Twitter's hashtag function is specifically taken up in a context of long-distance investment in the development of this major political event.

We fashion our identities in part according to whether or not we go online and what we go online to do (Green, 2010: 8).

Hashtagging on Twitter was in this case a practice of being Iranian. Tagging was one of the ways the events in Iran came to be seen as part of a single and somewhat coherent phenomenon by distant audiences. Many of my respondents shared their personal, emotional, and formal connections with Iran through the process of expressing solidarity on social media. During this time, it became expected to use social media to express oneself and where one stood regarding the messages coming out of Iran. Those who did not share videos, like Shiva, did so in a very different context than only days prior to the elections.

Her decision was intentional rather than a sign of passivity; Shiva's lack of sharing about Iran in an atmosphere where the news was dominated by the story, expressed her position on Iranian politics as an Iranian. She considered herself a Muslim, supported Ahmadinejad and saw the representation of him and his administration by Western news media as unfair demonization. During this period, the Facebook pages of Shiva and many others I was connected with through the site were a signboard for where one stood on the crisis in Iran. People differentiated themselves on the basis of their ideas about the demands, ideological viewpoints, or developments as they happened in the protests. It was clear that most of my contacts from the field defined and clarified their position about the conflict in one way or another through social media. Even the subtlest practice of sharing a video showing protesters calling for the fall of the Islamic Republic rather than simply protest footage with slogans calling for a recount or otherwise focusing on the electoral process alone was a pregnant statement of one's (potential) position/analysis regarding the future of Iran. And the dominant position was one of support for the protests. It is hard to tell, with our limited scholarly knowledge about viral politics at this point, how much responsibility social media can be given for defining this dominant narrative in the West. Postill argues that the "viral age" is marked by the shaping of political agendas by viral content, basing this on the case of viral politics in the Spanish Indignado movement (Postill, 2013). However, the role of mass broadcast media in propagating a Western political agenda in support of the street protests in Iran against the Islamic government cannot be understated in this particular case.

Amidst the mass of video sharing on Facebook, there were subtle self-differentiations that allowed people to use a body of videos, photos, and other content to design a fast-changing profile page that expressed something about their connection to and position regarding the events in Iran. For people like Mahdis Iranian-ness became a highly visible part of her self during this period. Similar to the YouTube remixes, situating this practice within a broader context of the more mundane practices of social media usage I observed, it is evident that being Iranian American shifted boundaries significantly during this period. Namely, while the relevant Twitter hashtags were promoted to actively engage a wide audience of

“friends” and “followers” on social media, the use of memes on certain Facebook groups had the effect of narrowing down the audience to other Iranian Americans, and specifically the second generation. The Facebook “community” Iranian Memes and the page Persian Memes.²²³ The latter is a page that I found through observing the Facebook practices of a couple of my respondents.



Figure 26 Examples of memes from Facebook pages I encountered through my respondents, saved October 2013

²²³ And more recently the emergence of the Facebook page, Persian Vines, has added short video content to this previously still-image based production of humorous references to being Iranian. This page combines the app, Vine (which allows the user to make a six second long video and post it to their profile, which can be linked to that of other users) with a Facebook page that can collect the equivalent of members who subscribe to receiving the new posts in their Facebook feeds.

Persian memes contains humorous and straightforward appeals to the idiosyncrasies of the shared experiences of being a young Iranian American. These experiences give clues as to how young people position themselves with relation to others (Iranians and non-Iranians) via reference to common misconceptions, stereotypes, common behavior/customs. In this way, tags and memes become seamlessly part of a broader register of being Iranian American practiced by my respondents, which relies on the access to insider status through unspoken mutual understandings.²²⁴ The use of tags on Twitter and memes on Facebook that I observed²²⁵ reveal two things that at first seem conflicting. While these digital products are very much a part of the production of selves through the use of social media, the identity of the producer of the original content being shared and reshared/retweeted/repeatedly tagged (whether in the form of a photo on Facebook as in the above examples, or in the form of a hashtag on Twitter), is both obscured and evidently unimportant. In other words, the significance of the signature disappears in the process of repeated reproduction as the meme develops. This is what Dovey et. al. (2003) call the “fundamental condition of digitality” when quoting philosopher and media/cultural theorist, Pierre Levy’s 1997 work, *The Aesthetics of Cyberspace*:

The established differences between author and reader, performer and spectator, creator and interpreter become blurred and give way to a reading writing continuum that extends from the designers of the technology and networks to the final recipients, each one contributing to the activity of the other – the disappearance of the signature (2003: 19).

While tags were used to push broad attention to an issue that was given shared importance, memes were used to create sense of commonality with boundaries defined by tacit insider knowledge. These two practices put Iranian American-ness into practice in

²²⁴ Particular supposed mutual understandings can be contested with regard to whether or not they form a legitimate part of Iranian American-ness, as in the case of the MLIP example discussed earlier where there is a possibility to challenge the “Persian”-ness of others on the platform. However, there is nevertheless still an entry-level understanding that the category of “Persian”-ness is being referenced and collectively defined *by those who belong to it*.

²²⁵ My fieldwork was carried out at a time when Facebook had not yet introduced hashtags

ways that are shaped by the technical design of social media platforms being used. This was also shaped by the familiar conventions around the deployment of hashtags and memes that were already established at the time, and which in turn give rise to the kinds of sociality produced through these social media sites. Like practices of remixing on YouTube, these practices were deployed at the height of a serious political event while having previously been taken up and cultivated in the context of relatively frivolous usage.

The creation of memes and hashtags is not the only way my respondents engaged in circuits of insider humor. As I have described in other chapters, experiences of Iranian American-ness are cross-referenced through various mediated communications. However, it is interesting that social media seem to offer specific, institutionalized forms of doing this. It is also interesting when second generation web-producers use this insider-referencing as a way to form specifically second-generation Iranian American digitally mediated spaces, like the My Life is Persian (MLIP) website. This was set up by a second-generation young man who told me created the site “just for fun” and invited his friends to join. Signing in for an account not only means a user is able to post content describing what makes their lives “Persian,” but it also allows them to either support or dispute other people’s posts on the site with the respective options: “Areh! Your life is Persian” and “Nah baba! Your life is not Persian.” The site (like the individual posts) is also linked to social media sites Facebook and Twitter.

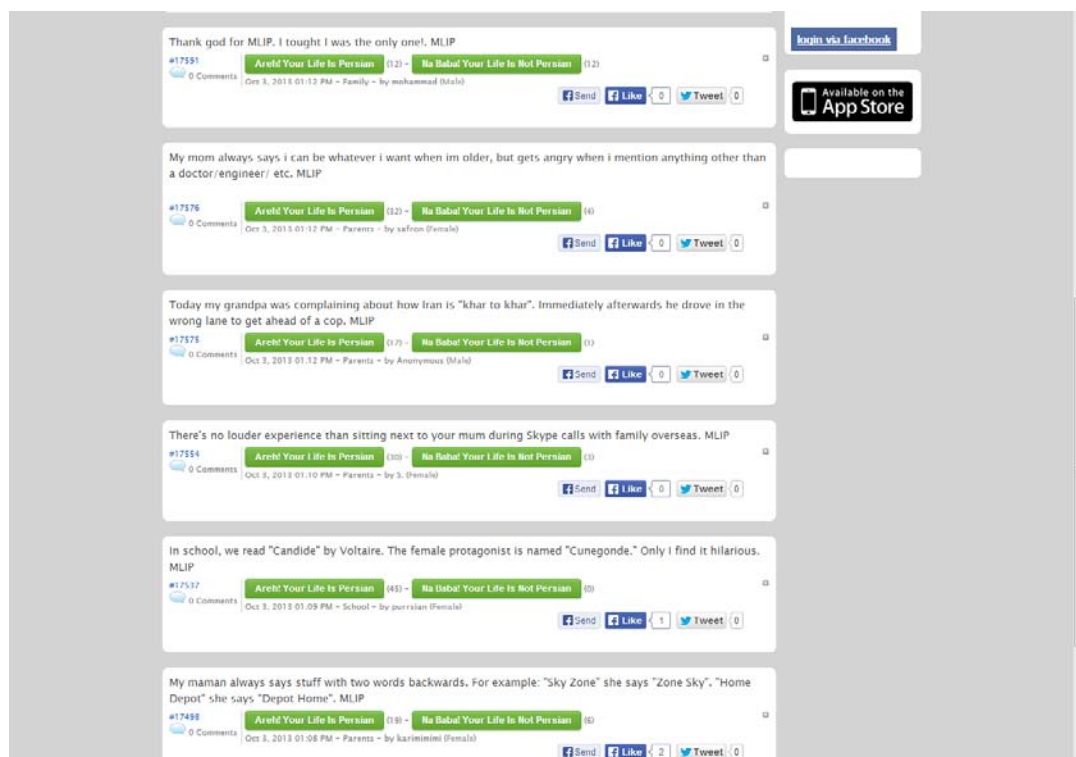


Figure 27 From the site MLIP, www.mylifeispersian.net, screenshot October 2013

MLIP is unique for its being created specifically for sharing these kinds of experiences among the second generation. The creation of such a specific space bolsters my discussion of practices described in previous chapters and sections, which showed how my respondents are active in selecting, curating, and bringing together various elements of digital and non-digital material and content in order to create and produce Iranian American-ness on their own terms and within a given editorial frame. MLIP is interesting as it invites the unique production of content around a predefined position. While it includes a harmony of different voices that give content and contours to second-generation Iranian American-ness, it is also made coherent through a strong central theme. This brings together the everyday reporting of microblogging like Twitter with the non-ritualized, everyday experiences of being Iranian American. This illuminates my respondents' ways of

being Iranian American as much as it illuminates something that is far more widely resonant about internet usage that links to the point I made in the previous section about the internet user as a DJ. As Gideon Lewis-Kraus writing for Harper's Magazine stated:

The promise of the Internet-as-Alexandria is more than the rolling plenitude of information. It's the ability of individuals to choreograph that information in idiosyncratic ways, the hope that individuals might feel invited by the gravitational pull of a broad and open commons to 'rip, mix, and burn' — to curate.²²⁶

Concurrently, Manovich²²⁷ has situated the rise of digital media within the longer trend in electronic art production toward seeing *selection* of existing content as a form of *creation*. Like the YouTube video montages, the material on MLIP is volunteered and intended to pay tribute to common reference points (whether as satire or homage). Remixes are like inside-jokes in that they at once share aspects of internet practices that are also used as part of fan-culture, parody-making, and other activities generally considered to be the shallow side of internet. Nevertheless, these same forms of citation and experience-sharing, as well as investment in production and commentary, arguably create a feeling of commonality among users.

Deep and superficial meanings

So far I have foregrounded one narrative about social media in the transnational context of the green movement. Namely, social media platforms turning into serious and politically significant media spaces from the frivolity that many otherwise associated them with. I have argued that it is both these characteristics that came together to lend social media usage the significance it gained for my respondents in LA during the 2009 protests in Iran.

²²⁶ Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "A World in Three Aisles: Browsing the Post-Digital Library" Harpers 314: no. 1884 (May 2007): 56.

²²⁷ Manovich, Lev, "The Aesthetics of Virtual Worlds: Report from Los Angeles," <http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/the-aesthetics-of-virtual-worlds> (accessed 1/12/14)

My respondents show acknowledgement of the shallow nature of Facebook and Twitter when they speak about their own internet usage. However, I have also shown here that their practices reveal elements of their deeply felt and changing engagement with Iranian American-ness. The affordances of digital communications technologies and Web 2.0 social media platforms in particular are important here, as they lend themselves to the manipulation, editing, mixing, and remixing of digital content, as well as the reproduction of this content through “sharing”, “posting”, and “tweeting.”

However, it is problematic to attribute these practices simply to the capacities that internet has for “interactivity.” Manovich (2002) has highlighted the shortcomings of the term “interactive” by pointing to the inherent interactive relationships between texts and people through interpretations of meaning. However, the difference is that with digital media, the relation between a relatively static text and a dynamic sphere of interpretations is complicated by the fact that the text is as dynamic as the interpretations (Lister et al., 2003). Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, and Kelley call upon the work of others such as Woolgar to advance the notion of “configuration” in place of “interactivity.”²²⁸

So whereas the term “interaction” implies a two-way communication, “configuration” suggests a two-way mutually constitutive process through which both user and software are dynamically engaged in refashioning one another in a feedback loop (Lister et al., 2003: 24)

In other words, as we configure the media we use, these also configure us as users. This goes beyond a notion of mediated interaction between users. A straightforward example is that of people using a hashtag as part of their practices of self-expression/representation, while also contributing to the cumulative fate of that hashtag (e.g. whether it ends up trending or not). I show in this section that as users of various social media platforms my respondents come to see themselves as part of various collectives. This need not be experienced in the form of sensing moments of immersion in the physical environment of

²²⁸ Their references to Latour’s Actor Network Theory underpin this perspective.

Iran. Rather the sense of being part of a collective of Iranians around the world, or of audiences with an investment in the fate of “the Iranian people,” or of a set of second-generation Iranian Americans who understand the same jokes, each mean cognitive and affective engagements with others.

The deeper meanings that social media usage seems to take on rely on gaining a sense of inclusion, connection, and/or belonging among others. Configuration happens not only with respect to technological systems but also political and cultural systems such as citizenship and/or work (Lister et al., 2003). I would argue based in this case, that Iranian American-ness is configured in relation to subjects’ engagements with the various social media practices and new genres of writing and video-making that have become increasingly recognizable elements of web usage. Hence, these practices draw on wider conventions of internet usage that are not specific to Iranian Americans. Yet what specifically characterizes second-generation Iranian American self-making processes is evident in the particular transitions between insider-oriented and outsider-oriented ways of being Iranian American.

What Parker and Song call “a specifically second generation form of ‘social capital’” in the context of their research on internet interactions is relevant here. Looking at second-generation Chinese in the UK, they argue that the intra-ethnic bonds that young people develop on internet chat forums combine with the connections they form to people and institutions outside the ethnic group, and those in power. They see these three kinds of connections as producing a combination of forms of social capital. By focusing on my respondents’ engagement with the Iranian Green Movement, I have shown in this section how my respondents deploy styles of internet usage that are conventional among social media users more generally in order to effectively enter the public discussion about a specifically Iranian movement. Placing these practices in the broader context of my respondents’ more mundane and “shallow” social media usage, I argue along similar lines to Parker and Song that the insider-oriented cultivation of second-generation Iranian-ness (through references to common experiences and tacit knowledge on social media) is

combined with outward-looking connections to non-Iranian audiences rather than being limited to intra-ethnic bonds.

For some, the emergence of the green movement was a major instigation for this transition. This event that put some of my respondents in new relation to their friends/contacts as it drew solidarity from their non-Iranian peers. Some were seen as authority on the relevant news topic of Iran for the first time and being Iranian at a moment when a relatable and “cool” movement was underway on the global media stage. Linking to institutions of power through trying to push for continued mainstream news coverage from the US was also one of the goals of (mediated) public participation by some respondents. I argue that my respondents’ social media usages concerning the movement are as much a practice of being Iranian by amplifying and connecting to the events in Iran as they are a practice of connecting with American friends, audiences, and institutions to raise nuanced awareness.

In addition to this point about the production of social capital by the second generation, I also make a point about the modes of social media usage in the dramatic versus the mundane contexts of being Iranian American. The genres and conventions of social media usage reflect consistency across these contexts, and so social media usage seems to oscillate between humorous, light, and frivolous content on the one hand, and communications about a grave and historic development on the other. What they seem to have in common is that the deeper meanings and sense of connection they bring about in users rely on the aesthetic aspects of new media that make things “real.” As my discussion of the examples in the chapter have shown, this is what makes the intimacy of an emotional connection deeply-felt, what gives weight to the trust in the representation of a people, and gives more profound meaning to what is otherwise seen as a space for superficiality.

Manovich states that every technology in its new stage is accompanied by ideological tropes, and gives the following examples, among others.

[N]ew technology will allow for “better democracy,” it will give us better access to the “real” (by offering more immediacy and/or the possibility to “represent what

before could not be represented”), it will contribute to the “erosion of moral values,” it will destroy the “natural relationship between humans and the world” by “eliminating distance” (Manovich, 2003: 19).

As is evident from the examples he gives, Manovich draws attention to the duality of these tropes for both deteriorating and strengthening connections. Similarly, the depth/shallows notion about social media that circulated in my field site reflected two conflicting but coexisting ideas about and uses of social media. Manovich suggests that ideological tropes are accompanied by “aesthetic strategies” such as filmic techniques for representing “the real” developed in 1990s cinema in order to create a sense of “immediacy” (2003). What brings user/producers a sense of deeper connection with what being mediated through these social media applications is not so much the use of web applications per se. It is the aesthetic strategies²²⁹ deployed by producers and perceived by users that give people an experience of immediacy when engaging with the web content in question. Such aesthetic strategies explain how the mediated representations of Iran’s Green Movement are read by the diaspora audience members I spoke with. The video montages (made out of raw footage set to music) offer an affective framing that makes them moving and iconic for this distant audience of diaspora users, and thus more than simply informative documents of the street protests. The “raw footage effect” is an important one when it comes to both videos of the street protests, other citizen actions, and acts of violence, but also in the case of the endearing, middle-aged “Iranian of the day” singing in a non-descript room of his co-workers. However, as I have shown, which aesthetic devices are used depends on the application in question. Different from the forthright feel of the amateur YouTube moving images, the meme photos and the Twitter hashtags about Iran and being “Persian” have their own conventions and ways of being compelling to audiences – whether through self-referential humor about Iranian-ness in day to day situations, or by drawing attention to the gravity of the political situation in Iran at a key moment as a “trending topic.” While the

²²⁹ Although I would see it more as a device than a strategy as the latter seems to imply more intentionality on the part of the producer than seems evident to me.

extensive work of scholars like Jose van Dijck (2013) has explored the various particular potentialities of use that are programmed into the same social media platforms I have discussed instances of in this chapter, I have complimented that approach by focusing on the actual uses that my respondents put these platforms to in a particular situation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I took the period shortly leading up to the 2009 Iranian Presidential elections and the months that followed as a focal point. This chapter looks at narratives that emerged around web applications at this time. Policy and media discourses tended to see “the internet” as an entity, and “social media” as a very important “tool,” and seemed to be contiguous with longer-running ideological narratives about networked technologies, democracy, and freedom. Looking at my respondents’ practices of web usage during this period and how they make sense of it within the context of their wider web usage, shows how narratives about “internet” and “social media” during this time are limited despite their prevalence. I zoom in on this event/period not only because of its significance in Iranian and regional political history, but also because from the vantage point of my field site, this event placed social media in a new light. It made social media a hyper-visible part of the Green Movement. And this was a break with the self-evidence and invisibility of social media in the ways that many of my respondents tended to see their own day to day usage. It was a period in which both I and my respondents came to see the role of internet in a new way, and this had important implications for understanding its role in the lives of my second-generation respondents and their ways of being Iranian American.

The transnational connections being made with Iran were part of the formation of Iranian-ness of my respondents. I showed that particular genres of media usage have the power to mediate deeply felt connections precisely because their meanings and usage have become second nature with the everyday practices that come with participating in web practices. Their affordances have largely already been established, such that the “opportunities or

constraints that the nature of a media technology places before us” (Lister et al., 2003: 16) is relatively clear well before it is put into use during a time of crisis. However, they do not seem to be static or uniform across applications. Rather, particular web applications come with their own affordances that become apparent through my respondents’ usage of them. And moreover, new fluencies in how to read certain sources or content as “trustworthy” are quickly adapted on the basis of prior knowledge and contacts, including those developed through face-to-face or otherwise mediated social interactions. Questions of what to trust are discussed publicly and privately as well as formally debated by users themselves. Established genres from both digital and non-digital media are put to use in new ways.

This global media event invoked a progressive and pro-democracy Iranian nation through the objectification of protest actions, drawing on discourses of universal human rights and characterized by images of English language slogans, young women’s faces, and representations of state violence and oppression. This objectification of the event and the movement for diaspora audiences, however, was questioned and contested as a function of interpretations of both the political circumstances and of the particular media applications being used (web as well as other media forms such as telephone calls and 24hour cable television news). The movement that came into being for my respondents through transnational mediation was shaped in that mediation and the process of interpretation that came with my respondents use of web applications to engage with that movement in their various ways.

At the same time, some of my respondents were also instrumental in shaping how this movement was transnationally mediated in their capacity as web media users and producers. Key actors or “cultural translators” (some even part of the second generation)²³⁰ conveyed interpretations of the social and political intricacies of the Iranian context for diaspora audiences, including especially those of my second-generation

²³⁰ Especially relatively young figures of the first generation and those on the precipice of first and second generation with professional journalistic aptitudes.

respondents who relied on these translations. For my respondents, the process of navigating both the media environment during this period was integral to the practice of navigating a complex landscape of social and political meanings between the circumstances in Iran and their own context in LA. That is, making sense of this movement and negotiating their own positioning with relation to these events relied inexorably on their practices of making sense of their media environment.

Conclusion

The central question I have addressed in this book is how people fashion ways of being Iranian American in this case, through their lives as second-generation migrant web users. This in-depth investigation has potential implications both for broader issues of how migrant selves are formed with the help of web media, and for understanding role these media forms in such formations of the self. The ethnography I conducted helped me delve into particularities in the lives of a set of Iranian Americans of the second generation, whom I befriended and otherwise made contact with in LA during fieldwork among the Iranian American community there. This approach was important because it allowed me to focus in the first place on the usage practices of people, utilizing this as window to understanding what it means for people to access the multifarious phenomenon called the internet. By looking at usage practices (mainly of Web 2.0 applications), particular qualities of internet become observable within the socio-economic, political, and geographic contexts in which it is taken up. Hence, I was able to show what certain digital communications technologies mean to people and what they do with them, as well as shedding light on the potentialities of the technologies themselves. In each of the chapters, I built my argument around a salient theme that emerged during my fieldwork, each one concerning a different facet of Iranian American identification and belonging.

In Chapter 1 on formations of home, I discussed how my respondents use web applications as part of their practices of being at home. I focused on their ways of dwelling in and being mobile between particular important places (in the city of LA, the parental house, and in Iran). I argued that place is more important for home formation than has been acknowledged by diaspora research so far, and I argue that second generation members'

use of web applications informs new ways of making diaspora homes with relation to place. And even though the analysis did not privilege the use of locative and mobile applications, this argument seems to be increasingly corroborated with the recent expansion of locative networked technologies and mobile devices, and the growing scholarly attention for these developments.

My respondents' ways of bestowing certain places with meaning as loci of home referred to but also expanded upon locations of home according to members of their parents' generation. This reflects how exploring ways of being at home is an essential part of understanding belonging among second-generation Iranian Americans. I showed how my second-generation respondents' practices included uses of internet that reflected particular styles of being at home as Iranian Americans. Among these were blogging return travel experiences, social media use in urban food culture, and mobile applications for staying in touch with family members. I argued that the technical possibilities and the genres of production typical to particular (web) media forms shape the styles in question. Additionally, I showed how the places my respondents inhabited also shape these styles. These places influence the possibilities of how home is formed in emplaced social relationships.

In Chapter 2 I discussed my respondents' use of web applications for engaging with the past. There I showed how the link with an Iranian past is forged specifically by my second-generation respondents. I did this by focusing on my respondents' practices of remembering, which also include a variety of media practices. I tried to show how connections with the past are framed as given, and appealed to as an unchanging source of belonging. This reflects certain similarities between my second-generation respondents and discussions of exile longing and invocations of the past. Through these remembering practices, my respondents position themselves in line with their parents' generation at certain moments, while at other moments they distance themselves from ways of engaging with the past that they explicitly associate with the older generation of Iranian Americans around them. They take up elements of longer-running exile discourses while also situating

remembering Iranian pasts more within the realm and attention of American institutions and audiences than was previously the case.

My respondents make use of particular capabilities of web applications (like digital archives of artefacts and music and the use of social media in traditional practices) in order to claim continuity with the Iranian past (as well as elements of the American past) through certain shared styles, thus making the Iranian past their own. They develop collective sentiments through their representations and experiences of the past via the mediation of various of its elements. Hence, their engagement with the past is shaped by the media capabilities of web applications, but it is also shaped by the affordances of physical objects such as historical artifacts that mediate the past in particular ways. While digital media and internet in particular are given an integral role to play in certain (ritual, educational, and personal) practices of remembering, they are evidently also limited in what they can mediate. And this is when other material forms that have been more reliably/effectively appropriated into the work of remembering take over (e.g. books, stones, altars). Studying how this might change over time in the future – as these practices change and develop alongside technologies – is relevant for understanding the dynamic ways in which the past is made constantly made accessible for people in the present.

Chapter 3 was dedicated to a discussion of my respondents' ways of dealing with the racialization of Iranian Americans. In a context of high visibility of Iranian Americans (as Middle Eastern Americans), my respondents show ways of appropriating this visibility, using emerging, oppositional categories of difference within discourses of multicultural inclusion. The issue of race has only very recently started to be the focus of scholarship on Iranian diaspora. Concentrating on their practices of racial self-representation, I show how my respondents use applications like blogs, websites, and social media profiles to start public debate and show alternative perspectives, using oppositional styles do to so. I argue that these uses are extensions of other spaces for self-expression about racial inclusion/exclusion, such as print media outlets and (face-to-face) art and discussion spaces. Furthermore, their role in the public debate is limited, especially when seen in

comparison to the mainstream racialized representations of this group (in mass media) that they are out to change. In this way, self-representation strategies are caught between lacking the power to change dominant narratives outright on the one hand, and on the other hand being keenly aware of the problems with claiming a “model minority” status that risks being used to legitimate discrimination against other migrants groups and less “successful” Iranian Americans.

These young people’s positioning, I argue, signals an acknowledgement and clear break from the older generation’s ways of organizing Iranian American-ness in ways that eschewed racial difference. It also shows how digital capabilities for representing race and the racialized body are taken up, which supports research arguing against the impending redundancy of race and gender differences due to web communications. Additionally, it shows how the broader media environment offers possibilities for self-representation as well as places limits on this; namely, the limitations on the types of difference that can be claimed in response to the dominant racializing discourse. These parameters are also designated by the institutional spaces made available to racial identity politics struggles in the US, including spaces of media representation.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I discussed my respondents’ web practices around the rise of the Green Movement in Iran. I focused firstly on the wider framing of the global media event, including the framing of the role of social media in the news coverage of the protest movement. I then moved on to analyzing my respondents’ practices around this period in the wider context of their web use. I argued that my respondents’ social media use and the wider significance of social media in mediating the protests shaped how the movement came into being for the diaspora and other international audiences. Furthermore, the use of innovative news websites by certain key actors – among them members of the second-generation – influenced the international journalistic coverage of the movement. I discussed how my respondents made sense of the media environment and its logics during this period, as they engaged in practices specific to certain genres of social media web use. I argued that my respondents’ web use draws them into ways of seeing themselves as part of

an Iranian diaspora through their complex media environment and the way they position their Iranian American selves within it.

In each of these chapters I elaborated on the specific affordances that came with the use of particular web applications or ways of accessing the internet. At the same time, I also showed how the circumstances in each case also afforded a particular set of possibilities for self-formation. This means that while the media environment was constraining and facilitating of certain forms of communication, this environment also includes places, things, bodies, social movements/political landscapes, and other parameters that offer their own constraints and possibilities. And as I have tried to show, these also mediate selves in the process of becoming Iranian American. This furthers a perspective that sees media and the environments they are used in as mutually shaping one another. Yet it also suggests that not only the media forms offer certain affordances, but that the environments in which media are used sometimes seem to offer some unlikely possibilities for mediation themselves – such that bodies or places become media – which (re)emphasizes questions of how to understand what counts as media, and the relationship between media and their environments.

This research had the aim of including a range of media practices relevant to the key questions. Although the motive was to address the lack of prior in-depth ethnographic research on this group and its internet use, the broad scope of the project was also its limitation in a way. It became clear to me that any one of the many web applications that have featured in my ethnographic analysis and which I encountered in the field could be made the basis of further inquiry into usage practices in this case. Indeed, new applications emerged and were adopted by my respondents during and after the time I conducted this fieldwork at a rate that would constantly require fresh bouts of field investigation in order to stay completely up to date. Furthermore, the focus on a minority of a minority of the second generation of Iranian Americans in LA meant that it may not be possible to extrapolate what I have found here regarding the Iranian diasporic second generation to

the wider whole, so further comparative work is necessary towards this end. This work lays a basis for future comparative insights about Iranian diaspora and media forms.

Focusing on the everyday lives of my respondents showed not only how their web practices are embedded within the wider, overlapping social fields of their lives. More specifically, it also helped reveal how these practices are part of processes of migrant self-formation that are not only oriented towards long-distance homelands, but also very much a part of the country where they live and the many facets of life that they style for themselves in that particular context. Much work on migrants' practices of accessing the internet focuses on border-crossing communications and frames the migrants on the internet as the quintessence of the modern world of mobility and technology. However, I have tried show that there is a much more varied range of applications, purposes, and motivations for accessing the internet than such a framing allows. I have taken seriously the many ways in which my respondents' web usage is indiscernible from the ways many (non-migrant) others use internet, as they take their meaning from precisely these wider modes of use as well as the logics imputed to them through the possibilities of the platforms they use. This does not mean there is nothing particular about how my respondents use internet, just that their modes of use are not entirely attributable to their being Iranian American or migrants.

I have shown that my respondents display various emerging ways of claiming and appropriating otherness. These sometimes set them apart from their parents' generation, and other times align them with longer ancestries that include their families, immediate and distant, and also situate them with respect to the varied environments they find themselves in as Americans. I believe I have shown that these claims are integral to ways of finding and sensing belonging, rather than a separate, instrumental move for recognition. They can be understood as part of a Gramscian war of position, which is a process that penetrates their everyday practices of forming and being themselves. This stresses the need within diaspora studies to pay attention to how transnational modes of positioning towards the country of "settlement" and "origin" are intertwined with one another, in this

case strengthening one another through long-distance belonging on the one hand and identity political assertions on the other.

These modes of positioning seek to co-define the terms on which inclusion happens. However they also do this within limits, and either implicitly or explicitly draw attention to the limits and contradictions of narratives of the color-blind American nation of migrants, the American Dream of material prosperity, America as open to multicultural (multi-religious) difference/pluralism, and America as part of the gender-emancipated/emancipating West. This came to the fore via my respondents' diverse activities of artistic production and expression, political organizing and identification, and other modes of self-styling. They tended to embrace inclusion (e.g. non-white) while highlighting cultural difference of being Iranian in America as well as the internal (class, gender, etc.) diversities among Iranian Americans themselves. Due to these particular ways of giving shape to Iranian American-ness, I suggested that the second generation of Iranian Americans contains the elements for significant shifts in migrant strategies for inclusion and transnational identification compared to the first generation.

While based on the case of the children of Iranian migrants in LA, this contribution has potential implications for research on internet and migrant identities more broadly. I have used this case to connect to wider debates on mediation and the formation and selves, and how this is changing with the rise, development, adaptation, and application of new communications technologies. I have argued that these young people's web practices are not so much the driving force behind how they live through multiple different social spheres. Rather, such spheres exert themselves upon these young people in a variety of settings and socio-political circumstances. Yet, their web uses can overall be said to play important roles in facilitating modes of positioning, imbuing them with certain styles that not only appeal to but also form this generation as Iranian Americans. In this research, I began from a starting point and assumption that selves are made real for people through processes of mediation. And I argued that the role of internet in migrant's lives is how their web usage becomes incorporated into their practices of self-styling, and how the

materiality of (and produced by) these media forms brings about particular ways of being oneself.

That is, shared ways of developing attachments to places, of remembering the past, of seeing/representing bodies, and relating to an uprising from afar are shaped by the materiality of particular media forms (including different elements web applications) used as well as the materiality of the products they help make (e.g. online videos, blog posts, etc.). These shape the practices, literacies, fluencies, and strategies that people use to stay in touch, organizing, and expressing themselves. Shared ways of identifying also rely on the styles of cultural practices. These styles are a testament to the particularities of overlapping and multiple ways of being Iranian American, while also showing intersections with other identifications. I have tried to show that taken together the media and cultural practices evident in this case bring about a sense of belonging that has come to rely as much on older media forms and preexisting cultural styles of being Iranian American as on this new generation's styles and their digital media uses.

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